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Systems-savvy selling, interpersonal identification with customers, and the sales manager's motivational paradox: a constructivist grounded theory approach

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This article combines a constructivist grounded theory approach with a focus on structuration theory to propose a new mental model for understanding motivation in the context of solving complex problems in contemporary business-to-business (B2B) settings. This study uses the interpretative tradition of qualitative research to conduct in-depth interviews of 24 B2B sales professionals and subsequently analyze their lived experiences. Findings indicate that intrinsic motivation stems attitudinally from a need to foster an identity of helping customers, introducing a concept called "interpersonal identification" with customers. That identity motivates the development of more cognitively intense sales proposals using a more holistic proposal development process – referred to herein as "systems-savvy selling." While interpersonal relationships have long been components of B2B relationships, this study challenges laypeople's stereotypes of salespeople who use interpersonal relationships to improve business outcomes. Instead, systems-savvy selling helps salespeople build interpersonal relationships and use business outcomes as feedback to strengthen interpersonal relationships and their identification with customers. Unexpectedly, it also finds that dual-role sales managers, who have roles both in selling and managing, confront a paradox of self versus others when managing systems-savvy selling processes. By sampling within an industry in which the research team benefits from significant expertise, the constructivist grounded theory approach relying on semistructured, in-depth interviews used herein leverages the research team's expertise while controlling for industry-level effects.

Keywords: incentives; intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; systems thinking; structuration; interpersonal relationships; interpersonal identity

Motivation is a long-standing cornerstone of sales research as it bridges central and mutual interests of both sales scholars and managers. It drives sales force behavior – and, to the extent those influence a firm's financial outcomes, they are critical to firm viability. Perhaps not surprisingly, Churchill, Ford, and Walker (1979) argued that compensation is the most important lever management can pull to motivate salespeople.

Expectancy theory (Vroom 1964), for several decades among the most individualistic theories of motivation, has provided one of the most widely used theories in sales research (Tyagi 1985). Expectancy theory asserts that motivation is a product of expectancy (behavior results in desired outcomes), instrumentality (a performance outcome results in a valued reward), and valence (the importance of the reward). As such, expectancy theory provides an operational, positivistic theoretical lens for the study of salesperson motivation as an approximate algebraic formulation. Namely, salesperson motivation is the sum of products created by performing behaviors that yield probabilistic outcomes rewarded by sales organizations. Its major implication for practice is to motivate sales organizations to develop sales incentive systems rewarding behaviors considered most effective in producing desirable outcomes. Thus, in advocating a reward system, expectancy presupposes the sales organization's understanding of the underlying behavioral mechanisms that yield results – and the notion that such rewards will motivate salespeople to perform those behaviors. Thus, expectancy theory focuses on providing extrinsic rewards to motivate salesperson behaviors.

However, while motivation can occur from one's focus and expectations of external rewards (extrinsic motivation), it can arise from a more introspective survey of internal rewards (intrinsic motivation). While sales-force compensation research often centers on discovering ways managers and organizations can leverage extrinsic factors, seminal work on intrinsic motivation for salespeople (Oliver 1974) is consistent with more general research on human performance, including studies in work, school, and physical domains. A recent meta-analysis summarized major findings from the previous four decades, finding that intrinsic motivation has unique effects on performance beyond the effects

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attributable to extrinsic rewards (Cerasoli, Nicklin, and Ford 2014).

Intrinsic motivation, however, is rooted in creative behavior, often characterized by a "flow state" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1997) – which occurs when a person's skills are fully engaged in overcoming a barely manageable challenge. As such, the challenge functions as an attractor for learning and developing new skills to tackle even more complex problems. Specifically, "flow" is defined as a state in which a person is in a temporary psychological merger with the activity, producing positive feelings such as enjoyment and enthusiasm (Csikszentmihalyi 1997).

While expectancy theory has proven extremely useful and insightful as a theoretical lens for understanding sales motivation, the sales context continues to evolve. The complexity of selling products and evaluating market outcomes has increased. Ingram (2004) credits these realities to the pluralistic approach of bundling products and services, infusing sales processes with new technology tools, accelerating product life cycles, and ever-increasing customer demands for tailored solutions. Indeed, rapid changes on a global scale have made B2B sales environments more competitive and turbulent (Jones, Dixon, Chonko et al. 2005; LaForge, Ingram, and Cravens 2009; Rackham and De Vincentis 1999). Perhaps not surprisingly, amidst these changes – and during the ongoing infusion of market intelligence into selling processes – contemporary salespeople have become knowledge brokers (Sheth and Sobel 2002) who leverage a portfolio of technology tools to operate remotely (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap et al. 2012; Ahearne, Jones, Rapp, Agnihotri, and Forbes 2008; Bush, Bush, Orr et al. 2007; Hunter and Perreault 2007; Hunter and Perreault 2006; Rapp, Agnihotri, and Forbes 2008; Weinstein and Mullins 2012). Thus, the nature of the sales job has evolved, as have sales organizations' baseline expectations of salespeople. Organizations now seek salespeople who are ambidextrous; that is, they can deliver quality service to customers by leveraging interpersonal relationships while also improving economic returns imperative to accomplishing their business goals (Agnihotri, Gabler, Itani et al. 2017; Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007).

As B2B sales forces confront a myriad of ongoing changes and challenges and rely on extrinsic motivational rewards, it is not surprising contemporary B2B sales managers often fail to motivate their sales forces (Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer 2012). As such, sales operations are suboptimal – partly because of poor understanding of what motivates contemporary salespeople. As a consequence of the countless changes in the sales context in recent decades, sales forces need to revisit key concepts and theoretical foundations of motivation. This research revisits this more complex, contemporary sales context by employing a more open-minded research approach.

Sales research should contribute insights that help solve contemporary practical problems. Many B2B sales organizations engaged in complex selling environments are very small – making the contexts less suitable suppliers of data sets required to fit the "preferred" quantitative models helping perpetuate more positivistic approaches to sales research. Moreover, literature demonstrating the power of extrinsic incentives to create desired results during simple tasks with clear objectives may simply be ill fitted to B2B sales jobs' more complex tasks with more ambiguous objectives. As such, complex B2B selling contexts represent a research domain well suited for applications of qualitative methods – and exploring the central research question posed herein. Specifically, this study asks what we can learn from B2B sales managers' experiences in motivating salespeople in today's drastically changing industrial markets.

This research explores that question, applying new theory and methods to sales research. First, it applies the more interpretive theoretical lens of structuration theory from its origins in research on sociology (Giddens 1984) and noted applications in information systems (Jones and Karsten 2008; Kato 2015) and accounting (Coad, Jack, and Rashwan 2015). To elaborate, Giddens's structuration theory provides a focal lens to consider how structure (rules and resources) is balanced with individual agency (human action) (Giddens 1984). It is a hermeneutic theory in that it stresses the actors' (salespeople) continual effort in sensemaking as the instantiation of social structure, thus emphasizing the importance of the interactions between human action and structure. Whether viewed as outcome or medium, "structure is only present during the hermeneutic, interpretive act" (Boland 1993, 126). These systemic structures are the foundations upon which we construct our day-to-day realities and give birth to new (and reinforce existing) mental models (Kim 1999). Through this focal theory, structures become instruments where action translates into change, thereby allowing salespeople to reshape structures interactively to serve their customers through interpersonal relationships. Sales organizations may set rules and procedures to guide behavior (structure), such as mandating the adoption of CRM systems to better monitor and govern sales behaviors. Structuration theory suggests salespeople may develop idiosyncratic structures to better meet specific customers' needs by socially interacting with them (agency). Thus, to understand sales motivation, structuration theory provides an ideal lens for considering both agency (interactions with customers) and structures (including mental models) that may be emergent in practice.

As a useful methodological complement to this focal theoretical lens, this research builds on the emerging applications of qualitative methods in sales research (Pryor, Malshe, and Paradise 2013) and adopts a grounded theory approach consisting of "systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz 2014, 2). Many qualitative researchers, such as Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006), trace the history of grounded theory to Glaser and Strauss (1967), seeing grounded theory methods as a methodological spiral beginning with Glaser and Strauss's original text and continuing today. While recent sales research both advocates and demonstrates the capacity of more positivistic ground theory approaches (Johnson 2015; Johnson and Matthes 2018), this research uses a more interpretive grounded theory approach. While seldomly used in sales and marketing research, constructivist grounded theory is widely used in psychology, education, and nursing (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006).

This study makes several important contributions:

- It combines a constructivist grounded theory approach with structuration theory – an established substantive theory relevant to (but rarely used in) sales research – to introduce a new method for studying nuances of complex B2B sales contexts, where researcher expertise is relatively high while available sample sizes are often correspondingly low.
- It uncovers a new sales process, dubbed herein as "systems-savvy selling." This approach uses a holistic perspective when considering, developing, and proposing customer solutions.
- It builds on previous sales research on organizational citizenship behaviors and identity theory, supporting the notion that salesperson motivation stems from intrinsic factors such as an altruistic attitudinal disposition to identify with customers.
- For salespeople serving in both professional selling and sales management roles, it reveals that sales managers may exhibit different behaviors. As salespeople, dual-role sales managers rely on their intrinsic motivation that centers them on more desirable long-term, mutually beneficial selling behaviors; yet, in management roles, they assume their salespeople are motivated by extrinsic factors and rely on rewards that encourage less-desirable short-term behaviors that may reward only the seller – thereby damaging relationships with key accounts.

The balance of this article is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief literature review highlighting selected seminal and recent literature related to sales-force motivation. We then elaborate on the study's research method – including its design, sample characteristics, data collection, and data analysis. We then outline the findings emerging from the data analysis. Next, we discuss how those findings relate to extant literature. Finally, we identify the limitations of our study and propose areas for future research.

Literature review

Mohrman and Lawler (2011), among others, observed and agreed that, in applied research, contributions intended to advance both practice and theory often require combining insights from multiple academic disciplines with the knowledge of practice. Similarly, Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) highlighted the value of knowledge arbitrage and the value of variation in the theories, methods, and knowledge as critical aspects of learning about important practical problems. In a similar vein, many grounded theorists identify key threads related to their focal research topic. Thus, while this research focuses on structuration theory and the topic of sales motivation, other theories and findings are relevant to framing and understanding this work. As such, the following section summarizes some major theories and findings from the sales literature that help convey key aspects of this study, including literature on B2B relationships, sales management control systems, and systems thinking for sales professionals. Later, the article integrates theories relevant to interpreting findings emerging by applying constructivist grounded theory, including elements of systems theory, identity theory, and role theory.

B2B relationships

Since the onset of the relationship selling era, salespeople have often been charged with managing customer relationships (Weitz and Bradford 1999). In considering outcomes from B2B collaborations, two key aspects of those relationships are of utmost importance: interpersonal (e.g., the relationships between the salesperson or sales team and their customers) and business goals (e.g., creating mutually beneficial economic returns for both buyer and seller) (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997; Ganesan 1994; Hunter and Perreault 2007; Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993; Narayandas and Rangan 2004). Sales managers are concerned with both aspects.

To consider the interplay between these two components (interpersonal and business goals), agency

theory notes that the principal's (sales firm's) efforts to govern and motivate the agent's (salesperson's) actions center on accomplishing the business goals with its business partners (Rindfleisch and Heide 1997). Sales managers often function in two roles – salesperson and sales manager. Role theory establishes concerns unique to boundary spanners, such as role conflict (managing managers' and customers' different priorities) and role ambiguity (not understanding one's role) (Kahn, Wolfe, and Quinn 1964; Katz and Kahn 1966). For interorganizational (or business) goals, as sales organizations focus on delivering value to customers, new smarter-working tasks may include goals such as forging better buyer-seller relationships with customers by proposing integrative solutions (Hunter 2014; Hunter and Perreault 2007). Concerning interpersonal relationships, applying identity theory may be useful toward understanding one's identification with managers and/or customers (Knowles 1973; Schermerhorn 1975). Hughes and Ahearne (2010) demonstrated that a salesperson's identification with organizations or brands may have greater influence over behavior than does management's efforts to direct those behaviors. Moreover, Ahearne, Haumann, Kraus et al. (2013) demonstrated the importance of interpersonal identification between salespeople and their managers in shaping sales success.

Sales management systems

As the research question focuses on how sales managers motivate salespeople, a summary of the literature on sales management control systems – systems designed to align salesperson activities with organizational goals (Malek, Sarin, and Jaworski 2018) – is warranted. Jaworski (1988) defined three basic control systems: input controls, output controls, and behavior controls. As input controls (e.g., leads) may be outside the sales manager's role, Anderson and Oliver (1987) researched centers on behavior-based control and outcome-based control systems.

Sales managers using outcome-based management control systems rely on extrinsic motivation of salespeople (e.g., incentives, commission, salary) and recognition. By contrast, sales managers in behavior-based control systems (Anderson and Oliver 1987) design processes challenging salespeople to think creatively to achieve complex outcomes (e.g., relationship building; interfirm identity; and long-term, mutually beneficial sales proposals). Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) can be integrated with both systems (Anderson and Oliver 1987).

In particular, Hohenberg and Homburg (2016) show that both outcome-oriented and behavior-oriented incentives motivate innovation-selling behaviors, which, in turn, drive financial performance. Collectively, this integration of frameworks may help in understanding how sales managers develop systems centered on leveraging intrinsic motivation in contemporary B2B settings.

Systems thinking for sales professionals

While systems thinking has taken on numerous definitions – including its popularization as a discipline through a best-selling book by Senge (1994) – this study builds from the more narrow perspective broadly referred to as "soft systems thinking." Checkland (1999, 318) defined this as "an epistemology which, when applied to human activity, is based upon four basic ideas: emergence, hierarchy, communication, and control as characteristics of systems." "Emergence" is a property that makes the whole entity "more than the sum of its parts"; "hierarchy" refers to a layered structure of entities – with some nested within others; "communication" refers to the property of learning and interacting; and "control" is the property to respond to various stimuli (Checkland 1999). Adding to this perspective, Richmond (1994, 39) viewed system thinking as "the art and science of making reliable inferences about behavior by developing an increasingly deep understanding of underlying structure." When systems thinking is applied in professional sales contexts, the emergence property of thinking holistically is paramount.

Systems-savvy selling builds on the concept of "system-ness" proposed by Meadows and Wright (2008, 12), who defined the term as the "integrity or wholeness about a system and an active set of mechanisms to maintain the integrity." Thus, systems-savvy selling refers to the salesperson's tendency to apply holistic thinking to solve complex problems for the selling organization, its customers, and its collaborators.

Research method

Grounded theory methods have evolved – from early origins integrating Glaser's positivism with Strauss's pragmatism and field research (Charmaz 2014, 6–7). While grounded theory approaches are emergent in the sales literature, forward-looking methods research by Johnson (2015) highlights its usefulness in exploring nascent research topics, noting such topics often lack sufficient extant theory for hypotheses development – particularly quantitatively modeling approaches. It is also worth noting that a number of modified grounded theory approaches have emerged, with differing ontological and epistemological orientations (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006), making the approach more robust for other research applications. Essentially, grounded theory is useful for research centered on "discovering theories,

concepts, hypotheses, and propositions directly from the data rather than from *a priori* assumptions" (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015, 174). Thus, grounded theory "can be used to gain new insights to old problems [the application here] as well as to study new and emerging areas in need of investigation" (Corbin and Strauss 2015, 11).

More specifically, this study uses a modified approach referred to as "constructivist grounded theory," used extensively in contemporary research – particularly in psychology, education, and nursing disciplines (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006). This paradigm denies the existence of an "objective reality," casting realities as social constructions of the mind (Guba and Lincoln 1989). As such, constructivist grounded theory fits the central aim of this work to discover – through social interactions with actual sales professionals – contemporary industrial salespeople's motivations, intending to contribute new concepts and theory useful to sales scholars and managers.

Design

Constructivist grounded theory methods bridge interpretative analyses with traditional positivistic assumptions, letting researchers explore research questions from outside-in or inside-out perspectives (Charmaz 1990). More positivistic approaches rely on extant theory to help outsiders develop queries based on preconceived theories using structured interview protocols (Charmaz 2014; Charmaz 1990). To implement the approach through interviewing, the researcher needs sufficient mastery of language and activities germane to the field of inquiry (e.g., jargon within an industry or functional specialty) to develop a line of inquiry while interacting with respondents (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). Thus, the constructivist approach is ideally suited for semistructured interviews of individuals administered by researchers with enough expertise in the field of inquiry to encourage respondents to share and elaborate while leaving interpretation or analysis to an investigative team.

As the intent of this research is to build theory directly from data on sales professionals' experiences, consistent with other recent sales research using semistructured interviews of individuals (Chaker, Schumann, Zablah et al. 2016), this work relied on the first author's extensive expertise in selling and managing an industrial fluid handling sales force. Specifically, this research leveraged the author's expertise and training to conduct semistructured interviews with sales professionals from the focal specialties and industry and to develop insights from obtained data. The qualitative approach enabled us to capture intricate details about individual sales professionals' experiences and thought processes while they reflected on their sales experiences (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Similar to other grounded theory research in sales (Friend and Johnson 2017), we used probing questions to delve deeper into participants' initial responses and clarify details about their shared experiences. Such questions also gave participants a chance to correct misunderstandings while elaborating on other important aspects (Malshe, Johnson, and Viio 2017). This approach provides rich insight into how respondents made sense of what happened in their work environments and how that understanding influenced their subsequent behaviors and customer interactions (Maxwell 2013). Thus, to explore these lived experiences, it was important for the interviewer to share expertise in the nature and complexity of the sales roles, the prospective merits of industry-specific sales proposals, and the emergent relational selling context within which their decision-making processes and behaviors ensued.

Constructivist grounded theory incorporates a central method of original grounded theory emphasizing constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1965), which allows identification of emergent themes (Charmaz 2014; Glaser 1965) and is used during data collection and analysis, including both within and between interviews. Each interview was compared with all previous interviews to identify new or emergent coded moments. This coding approach – and the subsequent creation of themes linked to theoretical sampling – guided the interview process and analysis to the point at which theoretical saturation was achieved (i.e., no new codes, categories, or themes emerged), indicating no additional interviews were necessary (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Sample

The sample consisted of 24 sales professionals working within the industrial fluid handling market. The intent was to keep the sample homogeneous by focusing on a single industry from the vantage point of a sales organization of an industrial distributor. This allowed us to control for extemporaneous factors that could affect or shape motivational factors. Subjects included 12 sales managers and 12 salespeople from the first author's professional industrial market sector network across the United States. The sales managers had direct supervisory responsibility for outside salespeople, and salespeople had responsibility for outside B2B sales and market responsibility in the industrial fluid handling sector. Salesperson performance was unknown before the interviews. All salespeople and sales managers in the sample are males, as males represent the overwhelming majority of those employed within this industry.

For the sales managers, as shown in Table 1, the average tenure is 28.3 years in sales, and all but one

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Interview identifier	Age	Title	Education level	Number of employees	Experience (in years)	Fluid handling market sector experience
Interview 1	54	Salesperson	Bachelor	Small 0–25	32	Oil, gas, mining, industrial
Interview 2	65	Sales manager	Master	Large (>50)	42	Chemical, automotive, industrial
Interview 3	49	Salesperson	Bachelor	Large (>50)	26	Pulp & paper, automotive, food & beverage
Interview 4	53	Sales manager	Bachelor	Large (>50)	27	Water well, wastewater, environmental
Interview 5	32	Salesperson	Bachelor	Medium (26–50)	5	Automotive, industrial
Interview 6	63	Sales manager	High School	Small (0–25)	38	Industrial, chemical, wastewater
Interview 7	58	Sales manager	Bachelor	Medium (26–50)	32	Agriculture, commercial, industrial
Interview 8	57	Sales manager	Bachelor	Small (0–25)	33	Water treatment, paint coatings, industrial
Interview 9	55	Sales manager	Bachelor	Small (0–25)	31	Food & beverage, oil & gas, industrial
Interview 10	39	Salesperson	Bachelor	Medium (26–50)	4	Wastewater, industrial
Interview 11	52	Salesperson	Bachelor	Large (>50)	30	Municipal, wastewater, automotive
Interview 12	49	Salesperson	Bachelor	Small 0–25	27	Industrial, municipal
Interview 13	61	Salesperson	High School	Medium (26–50)	35	Automotive, wastewater, industrial
Interview 14	47	Salesperson	Bachelor	Small (0–25)	23	Pharmaceutical & biological, oil & gas
Interview 15	56	Salesperson	High School	Small (0–25)	29	Automotive, industrial
Interview 16	35	Sales manager	Bachelor	Medium (26–50)	12	Food & beverage, oil & gas, industrial
Interview 17	55	Salesperson	Bachelor	Large (>50)	28	Pharmaceutical & biological, oil & gas
Interview 18	51	Sales manager	Bachelor	Large (>50)	26	Pulp & paper, automotive, food & beverage
Interview 19	49	Sales manager	Bachelor	Small 0–25	25	Municipal, wastewater, automotive
Interview 20	33	Sales manager	Bachelor	Small 0–25	5	Food & beverage, oil & gas, industrial
Interview 21	42	Sales manager	Bachelor	Small 0–25	7	Chemical, automotive, industrial
Interview 22	43	Salesperson	High School	Medium (26–50)	15	Water treatment, paint coatings, industrial
Interview 23	39	Salesperson	Bachelor	Large (>50)	7	Industrial, municipal
Interview 24	35	Sales manager	Bachelor	Small (0–25)	5	Oil & gas, mining, automotive, industrial

Note: $N = 24$. All subjects are male and are part of the fluid handling industry.

(91.6%) had a bachelor's degree – while only one had earned an MBA. For the salespeople, average selling experience was 24.6 years, with 9 of 12 (75%) holding bachelor's degrees. Company size varied from 15 to 200 employees, with a mean of approximately 30 employees. These data indicate the sample is representative of sales professionals employed by mature firms in mature B2B industries.

Data collection

Appendix 1 provides the interview protocol used in this research. Over a six-month period in 2015, we completed these semistructured interviews of individuals, averaging 60 minutes – each averaging 22 pages per transcript. Nineteen interviews (80%) occurred face to face and five occurred by telephone. The researchers found no distinguishing differences during the constant comparison open coding process between face-to-face and telephone interviews. Digital recordings of each interview, for professional transcription, followed participant consent obtained by the first author. Recordings of each interview were saved on a secure, password-protected personal computer, and all printed transcriptions were stored in a secure location. Interview recordings were destroyed two years after complete data

de-identification in NVivo 10 coding software. Participants did not receive remuneration.

Field notes were recorded after each respondent left the interview (Glaser 1978). Then, within 48 hours, the digital recording was reviewed and forwarded to a professional transcription service. The transcription service returned the transcript within 36 hours, and it was compared for accuracy with the digital recording. Identifying information of the participants was then removed from the transcript to ensure adequate privacy and confidentiality. The transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo software for ensuing analysis.

The interviews generated much data and information, resulting in 516 pages of printed transcripts and over 1,304 minutes of recorded interviews. Overall, the sampling and coding process generated 2,456 coded words and phrases.

Data analysis

Data analysis used an extensive, multi-process coding procedure, beginning with the first interview and continuing throughout the data collection period. Data analysis was iterative, ongoing, and inductive (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Line-by-line coding was initially employed to surface otherwise-undetected ideas and concepts (Charmaz 2014). Over 2,400 words and phrases

were captured in the open coding process, with openness to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities emerged and were discernable from the data (Charmaz 2014).

While this elaborates on the research method, Figure 1 provides a summary of the process used to convert the observable phenomena (coded excerpts from the

Figure 1. Summary of converting observed phenomena (excerpts from interview responses) to abstract generalizations.

interview transcripts) to more abstract generalizations (key findings) from this analysis.

Open coding was defined here as labeling concepts, defining and developing categories (see axial codes in the following) based on their properties and dimensions (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Saldaña 2015). Furthermore, initial open coding was done with "*gerund*s, as it is a *heuristic* device to bring the researcher into the data to interact with them, and study each fragment with them" (Charmaz 2014, 121). This information was used to inform the process for subsequent interviews. Throughout the process, researchers remained open to emergent ideas, codes, and themes from the data, repeatedly iterating between the data and relevant literature to ensure a clear understanding of the concepts – a process consistent with other grounded theory research in the sales literature (Lee and Cadogan 2009; Steward, Walker, Hutt et al. 2010). After 22 interviews within this homogeneous sales sample, theoretical saturation appeared imminent. Two additional interviews, which had already been scheduled, were conducted – confirming theoretical saturation.

We facilitated code validation by comparing and contrasting open codes through a demanding hermeneutic process – then aggregating data into a coherent whole (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Then we used axial coding to relate categories or groups to subcategories or subgroups, specifying the properties and dimensions and permitting synthesis and reconfiguration of the data in emerging ways (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Axial coding involved relating open codes (categories and concepts) to each other via a combination of inductive and simple deductive thinking based on the number of co-occurrences of open codes (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Saldaña 2015) as calculated in NVivo software.

A senior scholar on the research team, with well-established expertise in qualitative studies across multiple disciplines and contexts, oversaw the hermeneutic process by reviewing transcripts and codes after the first author completed and coded groups of five interviews. Ongoing monthly meetings and discussions were held among all authors during the data collection and analyses process to ensure general agreement on coding, procedures, and ongoing interpretations.

From these research meetings, we used a second round of the hermeneutic process to compare, contrast, categorize, and recategorize these codes and cultivate a better understanding of the data. We relistened to the interviews (and reread the transcripts) to augment command of the data. Codes were further reduced to the selective codes (i.e., the process of choosing main
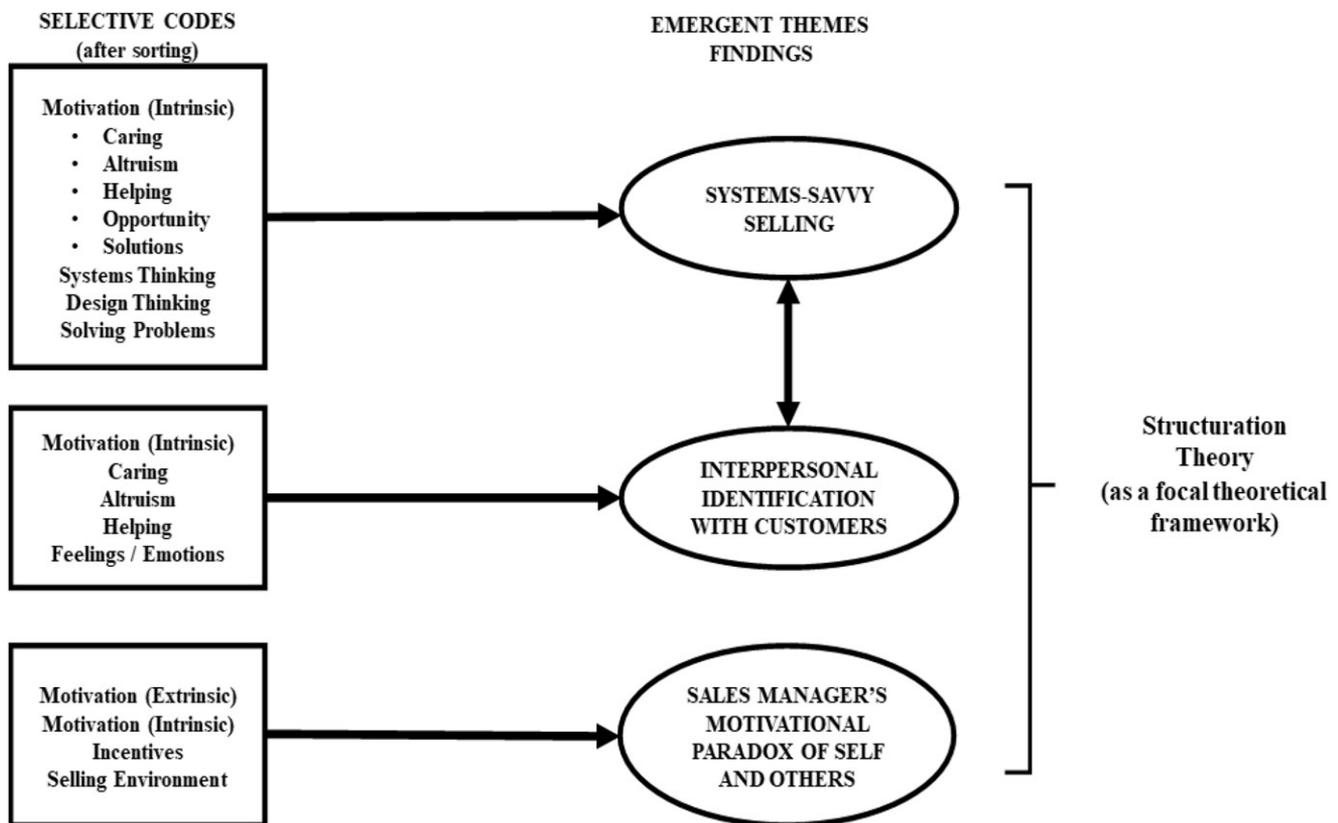

Figure 2. Emergent selective codes and themes.

Table 2. Summary of trustworthiness method.

Number of transcripts	Percentage review per team meeting	Approximate number of codes summarized
1–5: Beginning	34%	835
6–10: Beginning	32%	786
11–15: Midpoint	21%	516
16–20: Later point	9%	221
21–24: Saturation	4%	98
Total	100%	2,456

core categories and relating all other codes to those categories) (Strauss and Corbin 1990), and finally, we identified emerging themes.

As interview coding continued in the constant comparison method, several selective codes or higher-order related themes began to emerge. Figure 2 provides the six most prominent selective codes and the three major themes that emerged.

To establish trustworthiness, the research team reviewed the 24 total transcripts systematically for congruence on the open coding level. This process was driven by the lead author, who would review the transcripts and code each systematically. The lead author would then present a selection of up to five transcripts coded to the senior qualitative researcher of the authorship team. Once the two reached agreement on the general coding at the axial level, the lead author presented these coding findings to two other research team members – one with expertise on the relevant sales literature and another with expertise on the research method and design. After proceeding through this process five times, the team of authors arrived at the coding sequences summarized in Figure 2. This step-by-step trustworthiness methodology is summarized in Table 2.

In summary, the lead author presented codes to the immediate research team on five occasions, sharing sets of up to five transcripts at a time. This occurred in the beginning, middle, and later stages of coding up through theoretical saturation – paralleling the approach recommended by Thompson et al. (2004). At each stage, each team member was given the opportunity to refine the coding terminology. The process ensued until the team reached agreement.

Findings

This research focused on the experience of sales managers in motivating industrial, B2B salespeople in today's dynamic marketplace, and the findings are both practical and fascinating for advancing knowledge. This section articulates how the findings or thematic codes emerged from the selective coding process. Our data analysis – generated from the thematic codes contained in the

transcripts of the in-depth interviews – revealed three aspects relevant to sales-force motivation: (1) sales professionals committed to solving complex customer problems often think far more holistically to develop proposed solutions – using a sales approach we dub "systems-savvy selling"; (2) sales professionals build deep interpersonal relationships and often identify with their customers; and (3) sales managers serving in both management and selling roles confront a manager-versus-salesperson paradox.

Finding 1: systems-savvy selling

In this study, "systems-savvy selling" refers to the salesperson's tendency to apply holistic thinking to solve complex problems for the selling organization, its customers, and its collaborators. In recounting their most successful sales experiences within the B2B industrial selling context, salespeople experienced shared motivation when practicing systems-savvy selling.

Throughout the interviews, salespeople discussed the need to strongly emphasize a less mechanistic and more holistic process – an application of systems thinking. Thinking beyond one-time interactions or relationships was a noteworthy and defining characteristic of this type of nonlinear thinking occurring between these "systems-savvy" salespeople and their customers. In many cases, salespeople provided examples of understanding the organization as a system and envisioning their buyer (customer) as part of that system.

Prefacing our finding on systems-savvy selling, there is a popular view that solutions often merely shift the problem from one area of the system to another – often making the problem less visible because those who "solved" the initial problem are different from those who face the new one (Senge 1994). In long-term B2B relationships, there is an interesting caveat. Some mature salespeople have maintained relationships long enough to observe how solutions in one area may shift to another – and have learned from those experiences. Thus, even after adopting a longer-term perspective, consistent with Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987), salespeople may need several years to gain experience reinforcing a different skill – namely, systems-savvy selling. That is, these more mature salespeople have enough experience with the same customer account that they observe these cross-system shifts (e.g., they experience the full cycle – from proposal through implementation – and observe results across systems). That longevity may help salespeople enhance their systems-savvy selling skills.

Unknowingly, the findings indicate that salespeople were applying systems thinking not only to solve complex problems (problems no one had been able to solve) but also to propose solutions that made their buyer "look

better." This skill fits in contexts employing a complex adaptive system, which includes feedback loops intricately built into the solution development and proposal process.

In summary, this type of thinking was evidenced across the sample. Of the participants, 23 of 24 (96%) were motivated by applying systems-savvy selling and noted how the resulting successes enhanced their interpersonal and longitudinal customer relationships.

One salesperson shared the following powerful and motivational experience from the opportunity to solve a complex problem no one else had been able to solve for more than 15 years. It also underscores the importance of effective improvisation advocated in professional selling contexts – particularly concerning making your business customer look good (i.e., saving them millions of dollars):

> I went to see the customer originally on a pump and repair call; but, after seeing all of the dead pumps – there were over 144 pumps, and other pump skeletons up on shore - I thought, 'There has to be a better way.' Realizing that each repair would have been over $5,000, I needed to understand what is going on with the system. Spending time looking at the system and how the different components affect one another, I started to see things a little better. I explained to the engineers that redesigning the system would be expensive, but – because everything had to work together (piping, pumps, nozzles, valves, etc.) - it was the best option for a long-term solution, and ultimately these changes would save them over $8 million. If they employed this design in their other five facilities, they would save $40 million long term. This was extremely exciting for our company and me, and, when you see it is going to be better for the customer, there is a great reward in that as well.
>
> —Interview #2

Another salesperson exhibited systems thinking around various advantage points to improve a customer's long-term problem:

> Every single day, what drives me is solving a customer problem and seeing them profit from it. We look for an issue within a system – a customer with a headache – and do our best to assess the leverage points in order to improve their process, make them more money.
> —Interview #7

These data indicate strong motivating factors for the salesperson – solving customer problems and observing the customer's resulting financial returns. The same salesperson continued by sharing a specific system solution to a problem that had plagued his customer for a long time:

> We had a customer that was manufacturing an abrasive hand cleaner. As you can imagine, gritty hand cleaner is tough to pump and is extremely hard on the entire

system (in particular, the pump). I evaluated the system and realized if I change a few things (as they were working against each other), I could construct a long-term solution. I came up with a replaceable liner to allow for quick changeouts of the pumps. The solution enabled the company to grow their sales four to five times over the last two to three years. The customer is ecstatic, and so are we. I get a charge out of that!
> —Interview #7

Repeatedly, participants revealed a systems perspective that helped the salesperson uncover the relationships between behavior and organizational processes. In this case, the salesperson was motivated by providing returns to both his customer and his organization. The solution directly benefited the customer's process for replacing liners in soap dispensers, while reducing their costs. In turn, by sharing the success with his sales organization, the seller gained a new avenue to help penetrate the typically complex organizational procurement processes (Hunter, Bunn, and Perreault 2006) of other business customers. As such, systems-savvy selling represented an intrinsic motivating factor. Also of note, the findings support the idea a salesperson's caring and altruistic attitudes helped motivate them to practice systems-savvy selling when developing and proposing solutions.

The next quote comes from a salesperson who shares his motivational lean on the debate concerning the ambidextrous demands confronting contemporary B2B salespeople (Agnihotri et al. 2017).

> We can go in and we can identify the problem, the system's problem. It becomes more of sales by solving troubles, instead of walking in selling a commodity item. What really motivates me – what I love about my job – is to not to reach the bar, but to actually set the bar in different industries.
> —Interview #1

Clearly, rather than simply pushing product, this salesperson is motivated to provide quality service – contingent on an ability to apply systems thinking.

Finding 2: building interpersonal relationships and interpersonal identity

When recounting their most memorable motivational sales engagement moments, salespeople shared genuine, deep, and meaningful interpersonal relationship experiences. These outlined how important interpersonal identification was to their sales process. Of the participants, 22 of 24 (92%) exhibited high levels of motivation driven by their pursuit of deeper personal connections while cultivating interpersonal relationships with customers.

One salesperson shared that he felt motivated by good friendship with many of his customers rather than

by making money or making life easier – in contrast to stereotypes of salespeople as manipulators:

I've gotten calls at 9:00 pm from customers asking me, "Hey, I've got this job offer. I know you have a business. I just wanted to pass it by you and see what your thoughts are?" Having that personal relationship means a hell of a lot more to me than business.

—Interview #1

This person continued by sharing specific aspects of what made interpersonal relationships with customers important to him:

It's all about the relationship. Somebody who cares enough about you to call you on a personal basis, and where their motivation is not about the money. This is not only flattering, but it's very, very nice you can have those relationships. My customer generously gives me things, without me ever asking, just because he knows me and knows that I am passionate about certain things.

—Interview #1

Another participant shares how rewarding it is for him to call customers "friends" and how such interpersonal bonds strengthen customer business processes and outcomes.

I have been doing this for 26 years and calling in the same territory; I find that a lot of people, that I had called "customers," I now call "friends." That's very rewarding. The speed at which we can conduct business is so much better than it was, and no matter, it always comes down to the same thing. How do we get solid relationships? How do you get to the point where he trusts you? He knows that you're going to make sure he keeps his job?

—Interview #18

One salesperson explained that service ideology undergirds persona and drives an intrinsic desire (and personal reward) to produce better business results for the customer through helping behaviors.

You hear the word "serve," not only in our business but in other areas of our life. That permeates your business and persona as well. If you can try and do what you feel is going to be better for the customer, there's some reward in that as well, as far as a personal feeling. That feeling of, "Hey, I can trust this guy. I can talk to this guy. I can count on this guy to perform for me because he is a friend." When you are a friend, you go over and above what is required.

—Interview #2

As one salesperson shared the motivation for going above and beyond for his customers, the aspect of feeling needed when providing a solution is the "ultimate high":

I want to be needed. I need to be needed, and I do it obviously, pump sales, as an avenue to get what I want

in life to take care of my family. Yes, money is important, but money is not the reason or motivation to do something. I get a high every time I walk out of a plant and I've talked to somebody and I feel that they've liked me, that I'm providing a solution, that I'm going to get another opportunity in that plant because of me, that's the ultimate high.

—Interview #17

One salesperson shares how emotional an experience had been with a customer and the role religious faith played in strengthening their interpersonal relationships, which ultimately helped his sales organization achieve a key business outcome.

I remember vividly, sitting at Applebee's when he (customer) told me he was giving 100% of the business to my competitor. When I left there, I was about in tears in my car. I called him up after our meeting and said, "Before you make your final decision, at least come to our company and let me show you our new product." I was just focusing on the future. The customer agreed. He visited the plant, and we went through the benefits of the new product. He was happy and told us we would have a shot at the future business. This is a guy I know very well. I know him on a personal level. We talk a lot about business, personal life, and religion. I couldn't believe it. Two days later I get a call from him, and he said, "I woke up in the middle of the night trying to think, that I just wasn't sure about my decision, so I prayed. I asked God for an answer, and he gave me an answer that said, 'Why not share?'" He gave us half the business back right then and there! I felt so good not only because we got the business back but to know where the answer came from.

—Interview #15

These salespeople's strong feelings toward their customers (and vice versa) were very compelling and go well beyond simply getting along with others. These strong interpersonal relationships center on finding shared factors in life that motivate the mundane activities of day-to-day professional selling. Simply put, going the extra mile – helping others co-create integrative solutions through which both parties gain – provides a vital impetus motivating salespeople. Moreover, the degree to which these stories emerged was evident in the respondents' tone, which demonstrated how heartfelt these feelings were throughout the interviewing process. Indeed, the emotions associated with relationship building were concurrent and complementary with their shared lived experiences.

Finding 3: paradox of self and others

Building on the previous finding – and going beyond strong interpersonal relationships – are the additive effects of extrinsic motivation, which often

supplemented the intrinsic motivation garnered through routine selling. The participants were seasoned salespeople who had become so acclimated to this type of environment that it had become an element of their sense of being or their sense of self. All sales managers were actively engaged in both frontline B2B selling and managing their firm's sales force.

Interestingly, however, what emerged was a paradox centering on distinct differences in how sales managers see themselves – as sales manager or salesperson. While one might expect more commonality than divergence, this was surprising insight into how the roles (structure) interact with the agents during their actions. As represented in the following and in Appendix 2, the role change caused context-specific motivational blindness where the in-role sales manager self-identity diverged from his in-role salesperson self-identity. Thus, simply by shifting role identity, the same individual acted in these different sales roles discretely but was unable to incorporate both role identities concurrently.

Of the sales managers, 10 out of 12 (83%) demonstrated a dichotomy between understanding motivational forces when in two distinct roles (selling and management). Sales managers in the selling role described motivational forces as follows:

> *I love it when somebody (a customer) you worked with has some success as a result of what you had done for them … Heck, I am walking around 12 feet tall feeling like I just hit the game-winning home run!*
> —Interview #18

However, in stark contrast to the preceding, the sales manager explains what is believed to be necessary to motivate salespeople.

> *I do not like lengthy reports, but we do ask our salespeople for call reports that are time-stamped. That's really to motivate them. The hardest door to open as a salesperson is the car door in the morning.*
> —Interview #4

How these personas change depending on the role became an emergent theme early in the coding process and remained consistent throughout the interviews. The same sales manager continued by sharing another tool he utilized to motivate his sales force.

> *One thing we do that is a little unique is we rank salespeople versus each other, versus their budgets. So it's really a competition you are in versus your fellow salespeople. That seems to be fun and motivating to our guys.*
> —Interview #4

The preceding quote is interesting because he clearly stated it "seems" to be fun and motivating, but it also seemed unclear whether this sales manager was able to

place himself back in the shoes of his sales team to clearly understand the emerging paradox between the seller and manager. A different sales manager shared how they manipulate incentives to affect motivation.

> *We decided we would add an additional 5% to their commission for selling more of the product.*
> —Interview #19

It is worth noting the stark contrast between this incentive – purely an extrinsic motivational tool encouraging product sales – and the findings on systems-savvy selling and relationship building. It appears the sales manager (while in his management identity), when attempting to motivate his salespeople, ignored what he considered his own motivational drivers as a salesperson.

Contrast this conceptually with another sales manager who shared his motivational experiences about selling, which were squarely aligned with his customer relationship building experiences versus simply "pushing product" as a sales manager:

> *I like going out and interacting with people. My customers are all good guys. They are my friends. I really like making success stories. As you know, it makes you feel really good to help others, so I'm going to keep doing this another … maybe, six to seven years. It still makes me feel excellent to go out and do that!*
> —Interview #24

However, again, in clear divergence from the intrinsic qualities, the sales manager describes the extrinsic motivational forces inherent in their sales force compensation plan.

> *Our commission structure works on a rising scale. You start at a flat rate based on gross profit. Once you've reached a certain point, it jumps about 5%, then another 5%, then another 5%. In addition, we will put bounties (or the manufacturer of the pumps will assign rebates) to drive certain sales. I believe they (sales force) are driven harder by these things.*
> —Interview #24

Imagine the interpersonal struggle for sales managers working in a system that inevitably creates an atypical role conflict for their salespeople. Namely, one source (the sales compensation plan) "pushes product" in the short term while another source (the sales manager) signals building interpersonal relationships centered on forging long-term business relationships built on mutually beneficial outcomes.

Another sales manager shared a motivational sales experience where a large-dollar sale was closed by getting people to look at things differently: getting the customer and others to apply a systemic lens to the opportunity, resulting in a major shift in their approach. The sales manager, when in the selling role, asks the

"what if" questions and sees the multiple layers and interconnectedness of the systems. This example shows a culmination of the three major themes identified herein:

> *We were recently approached by one of the big auto manufacturers about a complex cooling system being incorporated into one of their new facilities. The duty points really weren't in our current strike zone of products and would probably be a better fit for one of our competitors' pumps. I explained that to our customer, and he said he didn't want to buy from anyone else except me, and asked [if there] was … anything I could do. I went through the advantages and disadvantages of how the system was currently configured and how the future systems could be improved if we changed some designs. Because we were doing it upfront, the outlays were nominal, but the long-term savings would be substantial to them. Additionally, I was able to go back to the pump manufacturers and help them design and manufacture pumping systems that would better support their system's configuration and provide them with trouble-free service. We were able to take the original design from around the low 80% to over 90% efficiency. Our customer fell in love with the system. The initial order was for over $500,000. When it comes together – and it doesn't always come together that way – it is better than money!*
>
> —Interview #2

One of the sales managers shared that, by having his salespeople focus on solving troubled systems, they could achieve both differentiation in the marketplace and sales team motivation:

> *We tell our guys* [salespeople] *to go after the very toughest application in the plant. If it's a new potential customer, we want the application that nobody else has been able to solve for them … that's motivating. We encourage them to get those system opportunities to see if we can come up with that solution no one else has been able to create.*
>
> —Interview #7

On the other hand, that same sales manager demonstrates paradoxical thinking (extrinsic motivation) in the following comment:

> *My experience in motivating is the almighty dollar. It really is. Our salespeople are heavily commissioned. They're going to put their time and effort into the products … with the greatest opportunity to make money. The highest gross profit product is where the good salesperson will spend his time and figure out a way to take that product and use that as a problem solver. That's what a good salesperson does.*
>
> —Interview #7

Collectively, these data points provide interesting insights into how sales managers think differently about motivation as they shift from an intrinsically motivated seller to a manager emphasizing extrinsic motivation.

Discussion

This article leverages researcher expertise with probing questions effectively to conduct a constructivist ground theory approach that yields insights obtainable by delving deeper (versus broader) into complex B2B selling contexts. Its findings illustrate that motivation stems from deep and meaningful intrinsic factors related to the salesperson's interpersonal identification with customers. First, salespeople seek to solve customers' complex problems using systems-savvy selling. Second, salespeople have a sincere interest in building deep, meaningful, and enduring customer relationships, and often seek to enhance their interpersonal identification with them. Interestingly, for sales managers functioning in dual roles, using systems-savvy selling and desiring to strengthen interpersonal relationships with customers ultimately creates internal conflict. As salespeople, these dual-role managers exhibit behaviors consistent with using systems-savvy selling to forge long-term relationships; yet, as sales managers, they hold salespeople accountable for "pushing products" to meet short-term financial goals (e.g., emphasizing extrinsic rewards). This discussion outlines frameworks to aid such queries, as each of these emergent themes warrants management and scholarly attention.

While prior research on interpersonal identification centered on relationships between salespeople and sales managers (Ahearne et al. 2013), this research discovered that a salesperson's desire to build long-term interpersonal customer relationships – including stronger dispositions of customer identification – manifested through the salesperson's focus on customers' needs rather than simply "pushing product." Interestingly, then, this work finds that elements of the seminal work of Saxe and Weitz (1982) – the noted benefits of having a stronger customer orientation rather than a selling orientation – represent building blocks for developing a salesperson's systems-savvy mindset. In addition, this research indicates that systems-savvy selling helps build deep trust through demonstrating altruistic and caring behaviors. Thus, systems-savvy selling is related to research on organizational citizenship behaviors, which also shares emphasis on the importance of those two traits (Ahearne, MacKenzie, Podsakoff et al. 2010; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Fetter 1993; Podsakoff, Ahearne, and MacKenzie 1997; Podsakoff and MacKenzie 1994).

Systems and structuration

Systems are independent components working together to achieve a purpose (Deming 2000). Giddens (1979) and Senge (1994) both postulate systems are composed

of interactions between agency and structure. In the selling context, structuration suggests salespeople use "duality of structure" where agency and structure shape their actions. Giddens argues, "Action and structure presuppose one another … " (Giddens 1979, 53). Giddens further shares, "Structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of practices that constitute those systems" (Giddens 1979, 69). This duality of structure includes mandatory recursiveness (i.e., is similar to feedback loops in complex adaptive systems) of social interactions practiced in social settings. In this description, structure is both the medium and outcome of the reproducible practices (Giddens 1979).

Macy (1991) posited that, within systems thinking, the self appears fluid – its structure changes, and it is shaped through interactions between (and interpretations of) real-world experiences. Salespeople were found to be working on the system rather than merely in the system (Kim 1999). This systemic thinking allows them to contemplate the whole system and hone their abilities to understand parts, see interconnections, ask "what if" questions, and be creative and courageous about system redesign using the insight to make a difference in themselves and customers (Meadows and Wright 2008). Giddens's structuration theory suggests agents (salespeople), attempting to enhance relationship quality and utilize those relationships to create reciprocal meaning for the solution, utilize structure (systems and interactions) to engage in the responsible creation of meaning (Boland 1993). Salespeople were constantly thinking about how to improve system problems and make the customer look better. The resulting shared meaning is an important element of the salesperson's identification (Hughes 2013).

Iceberg thinking

Continuous interpretive acts allow salespeople to see and understand things more holistically. This "iceberg thinking" (seeing things above and below the waterline) motivates them to take on significant issues. Ironically, in this role, the problem is bigger and demands new approaches, including an all-encompassing understanding of reality in terms of dynamics of flow and undercurrents inside the company. While this holistic viewpoint makes the problem seem much larger in terms of scope, scale, and expense, it resolves or ameliorates tough systemic problems – creating real customer value.

Opportunities develop at multiple levels, shifting into relationship-building activities. The customer is unable to pass up the opportunity because different levels of the organization now see, "Okay, the only way we're going to maximize the benefit here is to do the whole thing" (Interview #11). This helps expose salespeople to

organizational dynamics, creating (1) a platform for "showing off" their expertise, (2) more internal value to the organization, and (3) external value to the customer. This dynamic adds value to the company while building and leveraging salespeople's skill set. This builds a relational capacity (i.e., develops deep and meaningful bidirectional relationships) between the customer and the salesperson, generating increased success within the system (Arli, Bauer, and Palmatier 2018). These problems nobody else can solve have lingered for years because these systems-savvy salespeople are motivated to attack problems nobody wants to tackle. Experiences of tackling chronic problems demonstrate the significance of taking a reciprocal causal approach – emphasizing for the salesperson the importance of interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal relationships and interpersonal identity

This study challenges dominant logic by revealing that salespeople are not manipulating care and personal relationships to improve business outcomes at the customer level; rather, they leverage care, compassion, openness, and altruistic behaviors as part of the systems-savvy selling process with customers to improve desired relational dynamics and fulfill psychological needs.

Consistent with systems thinking, the research revealed interdependence and interconnection between salesperson and buyer. Salespeople focused more strongly on customers' needs rather than the sale itself. Participants revealed that salespeople are highly motivated by securing interpersonal relationships developed between them and the customer and how the emotional, cognitive, and social connection motivates meaningful relationships and sales outcomes (Ahearne et al. 2013). Furthermore, salespeople use the efficacy-enhancing process to expand self, which adds new resources, perspectives, and identities – broadening their ability to accomplish goals.

The theory that people are motivated by forming new interpersonal bonds is not new (Baumeister and Leary 1995). In fact, Maslow (1943) ranked "belongingness needs" in the middle ranks of his motivational hierarchy. Bowlby's (1973, 1969) attachment theory also advances this need. Baumeister and Leary (1995) purported, "human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments" (522). However, this study extends the research by suggesting salespeople are highly motivated to pursue interpersonal relationships and expand interpersonal identity with their customers.

Throughout the study, salespeople shared that the opportunity to create long-term, caring relationships with customers motivated them most. While some research

suggests buyer-seller relationships are asymmetrical (Levitt 1986), this study found them to have a free flow of sensitive information – and evident high levels of signaling about relational quality. Asymmetry was mitigated or resolved through the systems lens and by the salesperson's practice of systems-savvy selling. Specifically, salespeople actively engaged the customer in the solution process by encouraging the flow of information and fostering a deep trust in the process. Furthermore, findings indicate both linkage and recipro- cal actions between securing these relationships ("belonging") and salespeople attaining their emotional, cognitive, health, and well-being needs. Salespeople demonstrated high levels of positive emotions once they were immersed in interpersonal customer relationships and allowed to create value for the customer through systems-savvy selling, including displaying caring and altruistic behaviors.

Further extending the understanding of salespeople's personal identification is important because it satisfies essential self-definition needs and acts as a strong motiv- ator of salespeople's behaviors (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Interpersonal identification may be defined as "the process whereby an individual's belief [salesperson] about a person [customer] becomes self-defining or self- referent" (Kark and Shamir 2013, 80). Salespeople felt whole when able to create customer "friendships" and improve customers' quality of life. This study's findings are consistent with Hughes and Ahearne's (2010) asser- tion that sales managers can enhance salesperson efforts by strengthening their identification with a relevant entity. Hughes (2013) found that the extent to which a salesperson identifies with brands affects both effort and performance through the creation of psychological relationship (shared meaning and interests) between brand and salesperson. Similarly, this research finds that a salesperson's identification with customers provides motivation as an intrinsic reward, even in the face of control systems to the contrary (e.g., extrinsic incentives, including potentially ill-fitting sales compensa- tion systems).

The sales manager's motivational paradox

The findings build upon extant literature by elaborating on key intrinsic factors motivating contemporary B2B industrial market salespeople. Studied sales managers drove sales outcomes through extrinsic incentives and other compensation-based rewards. Yet once the sales- person's lower-order intrinsic needs were satisfied, extrinsic incentives and other forms of compensation had little to no influence on salespeople's motivation. All sales managers in the study had dual-role responsibil- ities: managing the sales force and conducting frontline

field sales. Although most described selling as "their first love" – consistent with their salespeople's motiva- tions – switching from managing to selling revealed a dichotomy concerning motivation. The causality para- digm shifts from linear (predictable and mechanistic) to dynamic (interdependence and reciprocal) between cause and effect. As sales leader, managers see salespeople's motivation as unidirectional (A➔B➔C). Consequently, they employ carrot-and-stick (extrinsic) incentives as motivation. However, when selling, sales managers become active systems creators – using design thinking within complex systems (social and manufacturing) – and become motivated by intrinsic factors such as inter- personal relationships.

Role theory – which investigates behaviors character- istic of people within specific contexts or situations (Biddle 1986) – improves our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Consistent with role theory, we argue that sales managers demonstrate a dif- ferent and distinct set of behaviors than in the selling role. Our findings suggest sales managers transition from salesperson to manager seamlessly but change from one role to another. We posit that our findings uncovered that sales managers develop a set of cognitive blinders – fixating them on playing the role at hand but preventing them from seeing outside that role's scope. Although they had dual roles, they displayed "single role occupancy" behaviors (Ashforth and Johnson 2001, 41). Understanding that normative or expected motivational forces derive value and meaning from the role itself (Biddle 1986; Parsons 1951) – and how sales managers define and identify with their roles – is key to uncover- ing this paradoxical motivational puzzle. We look to structuration theory to better explain "simultaneous role salience," as role theory lacks the conceptual dexterity to explain specific motivational behaviors (Ashforth and Johnson 2001, 38).

Structuration theory helps reveal that sales managers produce and reproduce a different social structure depending on role, as relational and self-identity automatically shift according to role and responsibility. Moving between these roles (structures) changes sales managers' schemas (mental models) through the hermen- eutic interpretive act between agency and structure (Giddens 1979, 5). Boland (1993, 125) asserted "meanings of things change for us and meanings that endure do so because of a series of interpretations we have made to produce them and reproduce them over time." This interpretive process forges sales managers' meaning-making and subsequent behavior, with motiv- ational forces and relationships taking different meanings specific to job roles. This helps explain why "selling" managers see relationships as utilitarian (and use incen- tives and rewards as motivational instruments) when

managing the sales force. Furthermore, it helps explain why relationships are meaningful and drive systemic action when in a selling role. Thus, this research raises awareness that upper-level managers should consider whether mid-level sales managers in dual roles, even those practicing systems-savvy selling, are properly leveraging the sales approach to optimize the long-term returns afforded through enhanced identification with customers

Future research

This research points toward several avenues of future research. This research proposes three new constructs important to sales scholarship and practice: systems-savvy selling, interpersonal identification with customers, and the sales manager's motivational paradox. Each warrant development, measurement, and consideration in conceptual models of B2B sales processes, inclusion in studies involving salesperson or sales management traits, and consideration in contemporary dialog concerning the integration of sales technology tools into sales processes. More generally, the constructivist grounded theory approach used herein represents a new means for leveraging extant expertise among scholars studying complex B2B sales processes.

While not the focus of this study, comparing systems-savvy selling to other selling approaches represents a potential new research subject. For example, though scholars and the popular press define "solution selling" in many ways, it provides a useful contrast with systems-savvy selling. Essentially, the extant marketing literature defines "solutions selling" as salespeople developing customized and integrated end-to-end product or service offerings designed to solve particular customer needs, wants, or problems (Panagopoulos, Rapp, and Ogilvie 2017; Sharma, Iyer, and Evanschitzky 2008; Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007). Although the two concepts share a customer focus, solutions selling focuses on the end state (the solution) while systems-savvy selling is more concerned with the process itself. To elaborate, the systems-savvy salesperson's process involves applying holistic thinking to solve complex problems for the selling organization, its customers, and its collaborators. Future research should focus on establishing other similarities and differences between the antecedents and consequences of these and other sales approaches.

By juxtaposing these findings into a conceptual frame with self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) – in a manner similar to that used by Hohenberg and Homburg (2016) to integrate the extant literature on sales management control (Cravens, Ingram, LaForge et al. 1993; Jaworski 1988; Malek, Sarin, and Jaworski 2018) – this research suggests systems-savvy selling represents a new core construct for complex B2B selling contexts. Specifically, systems-savvy selling leverages altruism, caring, and interpersonal identification (Malek, Sarin, and Jaworski 2018) as behavior-steering instruments (Hohenberg and Homburg 2016). In turn, it influences performance outcomes through intrinsic motivation. In addition, systems-savvy selling may be antecedent to proposing integrative solutions to customers, which, in turn, enhances business relationships with those customers (Hunter and Perreault 2007). At the same time, this research suggests outcome-based steering instruments (Hohenberg and Homburg 2016) may stimulate intrinsic motivation – potentially through a feedback loop. Managers should thus reward salespeople based on mutual outcomes attained through systems-savvy relationships, particularly for strategic accounts.

While interviews produced a rare mention of sales technology's role, this study has implications for future research in that domain. In particular, despite the sales literature's increasing emphasis on social media's role (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu et al. 2016; Agnihotri et al. 2012; Andzulis, Panagopoulos, and Rapp 2012; Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp et al. 2014), the protocol's query into changes over the past 5–10 years generated only one mention among the 24 respondents. However, that does not indicate that social media plays no key role in the sales process, or that research on social media is unrelated to this study. For example, the proportion of customer accounts – particularly those rising in importance to the strategic account level (Bradford, Challagalla, Hunter et al. 2012) – on social media platforms such as Facebook rather than LinkedIn could be an indicator of the salesperson's interpersonal identification with customers. Similarly, whether or not a customer accepts a salesperson's social media invitation provides an indicator of that customer's approval of technology use and has been shown to play an important role in the salesperson's technology orientation (Hunter and Perreault 2006).

Thinking more broadly about sales technology implications, as in other industries, B2B salespeople in this sample use a portfolio of sales technology tools to access, analyze, and communicate information (Hunter and Perreault 2007). Interestingly, one respondent mentioned the role of technology in serving as a gatekeeper (e.g., customers using email or voicemail to avoid interactions), emphasizing how important face-to-face communications continue to be for professional selling success.

Finally, another plausible reason for the interviews' lack of sales technology concerns is that the nature of change – or the type of commitment associated with adopting sales technology tools – may have shifted

(Hunter and Panagopoulos 2015). For example, while B2B firms faced significant disruptions in processes to implement new sales-based CRM tools, adopting social media tools or other updates to existing tools may be less disruptive and thus not top-of-mind enough to emerge as responses to the core questions in this protocol.

Additional research should address sales managers' tendencies to rely too heavily upon outcome-based control systems employing incentives as sales-force motivation. Indeed, this research suggests that intrinsic motivation – driven by solving complex problems, organizational citizenship behaviors, and the salesperson's interpersonal identification with customers – may be grossly underused in practice.

Limitations

While this study's sample was rich and carefully designed – containing both salespeople and sales managers within the B2B industrial distribution channel – it was relatively small even for qualitative inductive research. This was somewhat mitigated by the dual role the sales managers played. While a single-industry focus permitted a much deeper dive into the sales process – and leveraged the research team's expertise and the semistructured interviewing protocol – a broader sample (particularly across industries, levels of experience, and genders) would have improved these results' generalizability. In addition, the study relied on the experiences of the interviewees rather than direct observation of those experiences. This possibly introduced selective or skewed memories of previous events. However, this may have been offset by the consistency of results from interviewee responses.

Finally, the study focused on an industry in which complex solutions were needed. Other industries may have less need for systems-savvy selling – although the emergent concepts of identification with customers and the sales manager's motivational paradox may remain relevant concerns.

Conclusion

Salespeople have an actualizing tendency that leads toward greater internal harmony and integrity (Maslow 1943; Rogers 1951). This internal motivation is very powerful, as the findings suggest. This study is important because systems thinking – coupled with structuration theory – provides sales managers a new lens through which to view motivation. These theories provided the tools needed to drill down into the lived experiences of the salespeople to uncover what was percolating underneath the motivational top layer.

Sales managers need to shift their mind-set to envision and support selling processes in new ways.

Envisioning the selling system as a set of interrelationships rather than a linear causal chain can create more effective and efficient sales processes. Having the understanding that salespeople in transformational selling environments are motivated by "systems-savvy-selling," interpersonal relationships and identity with customers permit sales leaders to focus energy and resources on higher levels of development programs. Salespeople seek deep and meaningful relationships with customers – creating a "we" outlook rather than "us" or "them." Sales manager thinking needs to focus on intrinsic motivation to encourage salespeople to self-actualize to a new stage of consciousness. In this new world of B2B sales, sales managers should decouple sales performance evaluation from simple measures (such as share of the customer's wallet) to ones that foster higher-order motivation of their sales forces and enhanced customer relationship development.

This research provides managers a better understanding about their outside sales forces' true motivations. Blinder (2011, 13) stated, "Changing the way workers are treated may boost productivity more than changing the way they are paid." Consequently, managers need to shed outmoded views on sales force motivation and look at other ways to drive change. Alternatively, a better approach might be to rethink the entire motivational paradigm. Deci and Flaste (1995, 10) suggested the question sales managers should be asking is, "How can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?" This study demonstrates the need to shift resources and energy toward models better aligning with what matters to salespeople.

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Appendix 1. Interview protocol

Introduction (interviewer): *"Hello (name_____). Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before getting started, there are a couple of things I would like to cover."*

Purpose and Format for the Interview (Interviewer): *"As an [academic researcher], I am interested in developing a greater understanding of the sales experience. I will ask you a series of open-ended questions about this topic, and I will also ask one or more follow-up questions as you respond. The interview will last approximately 60 – 90 minutes."*

Confidentiality (Interviewer): "*Everything you share in this interview will be kept in strictest confidence, and your comments will be transcribed anonymously – omitting your name, anyone else you refer to in this interview, as well as the name of your current organization and/or past organizations. Your interview responses will be included with all the other interviews I conduct."*

Audio Taping (Interviewer): "*To help me capture your responses accurately and without being overly distracting by taking notes, I would like to record our conversation with your permission. Again, your responses will be kept confidential. If, at any time, you are uncomfortable with this interview, please let me know, and I will turn the recorder off." "Any questions before we begin?"*

Initial/Background Questions (same for both sales managers and salespeople):

1. Please tell me about yourself, both personally and professionally?
2. Please describe your current role and responsibilities?

Core Questions: Sales Managers

• Tell me of a time when you had a great experience in the sales process that resulted in a successful sales engagement involving the customer, your salesperson, and you. Please be as detailed as you can in relating this experience from the initial engagement to completion of the sale.
• Tell me of a time when you had a poor experience in the sales process that resulted in an unsuccessful sales engagement involving the customer, your salesperson, and you. Please be as detailed as you can in relating this experience from the initial engagement to completion of the sale.
• Tell me of a time when rewards or incentives motivated your salesperson to go over and above the expectations of the customer and resulted in a great sales experience.
• From your experience, what or how has the sales environment evolved over the past 5–10 years?

Core Questions: Salespeople

• Tell me of a time when you had a great experience in the sales process that resulted in a successful sales engagement involving the customer, your sales manager, and you. Please be as detailed as you can in relating this experience from the initial engagement to completion of the sale.
• Tell me of a time when you had a poor experience in the sales process that resulted in an unsuccessful sales engagement involving the customer, your sales manager, and you. Please be as detailed as you can in relating this experience from the initial engagement to completion of the sale.
• Tell me of a time when rewards or incentives motivated you to go over and above expectations of the customer and resulted in a great sales experience.
• From your experience, what or how has the sales environment evolved over the past 5–10 years?

Additional probing questions (note: brackets indicate changes for salespeople versus sales managers):

1. What do you think is contributing to these shifts or change?
2. How do you think this will evolve 5–10 years from now?
3. What incentives or reward structures are you currently finding work best to motivate your sales personnel [you] to create great sales experiences?
4. What changes have you seen in the past 5 years in what incentives or rewards work best?
5. What changes to the reward or incentive systems do you anticipate in the near future (say 5 years)?
6. [Why do you think that?]

Additional Probes (both salespeople and sales managers)

Tell me more about that.

What did that mean to you?

Please go on.

Can you please elaborate and give me a scenario of that?

Wrap-up

Do you have anything else you wish to share with me at this time?

May I contact you in the future if we have other follow-up questions?

Appendix 2. Additional comments from sales managers demonstrating the paradox between seeing of self and others.

Additional Comments from Sales Managers Demonstrating the Paradox Between Seeing of Self and Others

Selling Role: *"Yeah, my personal approach is one that I want to make a difference to the customer or to the person that I'm building a relationship with because of the business climate and what I try to do now is how to think I can help this person make his life a little easier during this close of a day. That's the approach that I use. What can I do for them that lessens his load on his verdict?"* **Sales Manager Role:** *"I think you give someone you're paying well and then if you can make another 15%, 20% of his base fixed salary, that's a good incentive. It strives them to make the extras where if he or she wants to buy a new watch or a dryer, or make some home improvements in his house, just tell as much as possible, 'You know what, then I can get this amount of money then I can do it, and then it motivates him to try to sell more.'*
Interview #8

Selling Role: *"I spend half of my time on thinking. I spend a lot of time in research, not only for my applications but for all our salespeople's applications. I try to thoroughly research because the last thing we want is our recommendation not to succeed. I try to gain a relationship with a customer, which is our ultimate goal, is to help the customer look good for their company."*

Sales Manager Role: *"We run some sales contests from time to time. Primarily if we're taking on a new product to represent we will usually incentivize through either a trip or gift cards. If a certain sales goal is met for a new product. The salesperson that does sell the most of the new product for a time period say 6 months, with the new product. We have done that from time to time."*
Interview #7

Selling Role: *"I think that people like buying from friends better than suppliers or whatever. It doesn't always work out, but where we are friends with our customers and are basically friends, that breaks down a lot of walls and simplifies communication where you can really understand what's going on."* **Sales Manager Role:** *"… Part of the success is the more people you stand in front of in a day … There is a numbers game there, so that's one metric I like to look at it as the guy making six calls a day or 10 calls a day and is he actually meeting with them or is he just dropping business cards, because the other thing is I believe in appointments and all of that, so that's one metric."*
Interview #9

Selling Role: *"One of the engineers, his wife had open heart surgery, and it's not, 'Hey, what do you need?' It's "Hey, how's the wife doing? What's going on? How's … ' You ask about that. You get them involved in a personal relationship, and then it's, 'Oh, by the way, what do you need?' Because you're more concerned about them than the business, and people are more concerned about their wife and family, because the family's first, before the business."* **Sales Manager Role:** *"Yes, they're [salespeople] motivated because they're on a commission. They get a salary and commission. The more you sell, the more you make."*
Interview #6