

Systems-Savvy Selling: A Grounded Theory Approach to Understanding What Motivates Contemporary Industrial Salespeople

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

What is the experience of motivating B2B salespeople in today's drastically changing industrial markets?

Method and Data

This study employs a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to capture the lived experiences of sales managers and salespeople as they grapple with the dynamic internal and external forces that originate inside and outside the organization which impact and shape the sales experience from a motivational context. To uncover this rich data, a semi-structured interview methodology was used to develop grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2009) around what is the experience of motivating B2B salespeople in today's industrial selling environment.

The sample consists of 24 individuals all within the industrial fluid handling market. Subjects include 12 sales managers and 12 salespeople from the industrial market sector, yielding 24 transcripts. These distributors support the sales and after sales functions of various manufacturers of fluid handling equipment.

Data analysis was iterative, ongoing and inductive. Line-by-line coding was initially employed to surface the ideas and concepts that might otherwise be undetected (Charmaz, 2014). Over 2,400 words and phrases were captured in the

open coding process with openness to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities discernible from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Validation of codes was facilitated by participating in a demanding two-round hermeneutic process by which open codes were compared and contrasted, aggregating data back together into a coherent whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

Summary of Findings

In recounting their most successful sales experiences within the B2B industrial selling context, salespeople shared they were extremely motivated by "systems-savvy selling."

Twenty-three (23) out of twenty-four (24) participants were motivated by "systems-savvy selling" forces to enhance their interpersonal relationship with the customer.

When recounting their most memorable motivational moments as it relates to sales engagements, salespeople shared *genuine* interpersonal relationships and interpersonal identification as being extremely significant.

Twenty-two (22) out of twenty-four (24) participants exhibited high levels of motivation as a result of pursuing deeper personal connections with the customers while cultivating an interpersonal identity through helping others to broaden one's sense of self.

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When sales managers discussed what motivated them and what motivated their salespeople, there is a distinct paradox between seeing of self and others.

Ten (10) out of twelve (12) sales managers demonstrated a dichotomy between the understanding of motivational forces when in two distinct roles (selling and management).

Key Contributions

Through the analysis of lived experiential qualitative data from sales professionals in the B2B industrial fluid handling market at various organizations, this research uncovers the behaviors and practices that best create and hinder the conditions through which motivation occurs. Specifically, this study challenges the dominant logic by revealing that salespeople are not manipulating care and personal relationships to improve business outcomes at the customer level; rather, using care, compassion, openness and altruistic behaviors in their selling approach to the customer to improve desired relational dynamics and to fulfill certain psychological needs. In particular, this research discovers many shared experiences in which salespeople were applying what this research dubs as

“systems-savvy selling.” “System-ness” is a term borrowed from Meadows and Wright (2008), in which the word is used to refer to the “integrity or wholeness about a system and an active set of mechanisms to maintain the integrity” (p. 12). In such selling contexts, the salesperson seeks a long-term interpersonal relationship with the customer by focusing on the customer’s needs at various dimensions rather than simply “pushing product.” This “systems-savvy selling” builds deep trust through demonstrating altruistic and caring behaviors. Thus, “systems-savvy selling” occurs when the salesperson experiences high levels of intrinsic motivation through adapting a meta view to solving a chronic, extensive and protracted problem. This view is one in which the salesperson is continuously interpreting the systemic problem and utilizes the data gleaned from the hermeneutic process to change the framing and to relax and expand the boundaries of the problem and the relationship. Additionally, this research uncovers the paradox selling managers face between the seeing of self and the seeing of others (salespeople) and suggests that the duality of motivational meaning is role dependent.

References are available on request.