Exploring Rapport Building in B-to-B Sales

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Abstract

Tekijä(t) Aleksi Kasari	**Ryhmätunnus tai aloitusvuosi** 2012
Raportin nimi Tutkimus ymmärryksen rakentamisesta B-to-B myynnissä	**Sivu- ja liitesivumäärä** 32 + 0
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Opinnäytteessä keskitytään asiakassuhteiden rakentamista edellyttäviin tekijöihin ja siihen, millä keinoilla myyjät rakentavat yhteisymmärrystä asiakkaan kanssa, jotta mahdollinen asiakassuhde voidaan saavuttaa. Lähtökohtana on myyjän ja ostajan ensitapaaminen. Tavoitteena oli kasvattaa ymmärrystä yhteisymmärryksen rakentumisesta, asiakassuhteiden rakentumisesta, myyjä-ostaja suhteen dynamiikasta, sekä saada tarkempaa ja kattavampaa tietoa myyjien ja ostajien toiminnasta ja käyttäytymisestä.

Opinnäytetyö rakentuu teoriaosasta ja empiirisestä osasta. Teoriaosa tutkii ja tarkastelee myymistä ja myyntityötä, suhdemarkkinointia ja yhteisymmärryksen merkitystä suhdemarkkinoinnissa. Empiirinen osa tarkastelee myyjien näkökulmia ja kokemuksia yhteisymmärryksen rakentamisesta asiakkaan kanssa. Opinnäytetyö on tehty käyttäen laadullisia haastatteluita.

Tutkimuksessa käytetyt yritykset ovat suomalaisia, jotka toimivat kansainvälisessä markkinaympäristössä. Myyjien näkökulmat ja kokemukset yhteisymmärryksen rakentamisesta asiakassuhteessa pyrittiin selvittämään tutkimuksessa, sekä kartoittamaan yhtäläisyydet myyjien haastatteluista.

Haastattelujen perusteella pystyttiin muodostamaan kategoriat myyjien ajatuksista sekä toimintatavoista yhteisymmärryksen rakentamisessa. Eri myyjien näkökulmissa toistuivat vahvasti samat teemat selkeästi läpi tutkimuksen. Voimakkain yksimielisyys vallitsi kuuntelun tärkeyden merkityksessä yhteisymmärryksen rakentamisen välineenä.

Opinnäyte antaa yrityksille aineistoa, jonka pohjalta on mahdollista tarkastella oman organisaation myyntitoiminnan kehittämistä ja myyntivalmennusta. Lisäksi yksittäiset myyjät saavat materiaalia, jonka avulla he voivat tunnistaa omat vahvuutensa ja heikkoutensa yhteisymmäryksen rakentamisessa asiakkaan kanssa.

Asiasanat

Yhteisymmärrys, suhdemarkkinointi, asiakassuhde, yritysmyynti, myyntityö

Abstract

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This thesis focuses on the factors that are needed to form a business relationship, along with how the salespeople build rapport with the customer so that a possible business relationship can be achieved. The studied situation is the initial meeting of the buyer and the seller. The objective was to increase knowledge about rapport building, relationship development, the dynamics of the buyer-seller relationship and to acquire more specific and comprehensive knowledge on how the buyers and sellers act and behave.

This thesis is constructed with a theory part and a empirical part. The theory part studies and scrutinizes selling and saleswork, relationship selling and the significance of rapport building in relationship selling. The empirical part examines salespeople's views and experiences regarding rapport building in relationship development. This study was conducted using semi-instructive, qualitative interviews.

The companies used in the study were Finnish companies that act in the international sales environment. The study intended to discover the views and experiences of salespeople regarding rapport building, along with mapping out the similarities in the salespeople's interviews.

Based on the interviews it was possible to form categories regarding salespeople's thoughts and actions in rapport building. Clear similarities between the interviewees' responses were strongly visible throughout the study. The clearest consensus concerned listening as the most important tool in building rapport.

This thesis gives companies material which they can use in sales development and coaching. In addition, salespeople get material which can be used to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses in building rapport with the customer.

Key words
Rapport building, relationship selling, business relationship, business-to-business sales, saleswork

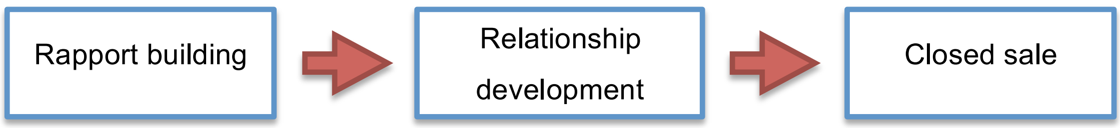
Table of contents

1 Introduction

The business-to-business sales environment has changed tremendously over the past few decades and continues to morph towards an even more complex state. In this vast and challenging environment businesses have to find more and more innovative ways to survive and differentiate themselves from the competition – a difficult task considering the quantity of competitors, especially when global companies are taken into account. Globalization has distributed the competition from local to global.

The other vast change in the B-to-B environment in the Western world has been the transition from goods production to services. Production has been systematically moved from the Western world particularly to Asia. The effect of this is shown as reduced costs of production and in the creation of a more aggressive competition through globalization.

Considering these trends, it is ever more important to the sellers to successfully build rapport with their customers to achieve better results in the field of selling. Successful rapport building can give companies the desired competitive advantage resulting in a higher percentage of closed sales.



Picture 1. Illustrative phases of a new business relationship as seen in this study

This thesis focuses on the initial one-to-one meeting between the buyer and the seller. The researched party in this case is the salespeople. Meetings between more than two people and the subsequent meetings were left out so that better and more precise results could be achieved.

1.1. Background

In the 1990s, relationships were thought to be the essential ingredient in retaining customer's loyalty. The consensus was that acquiring a new customer cost five times as much as keeping a current customer satisfied. This phenomenon was boosted by market deregulation, free trade, capitalism and democracy which all led to a huge expansion in market globalization. Mergers and international expansion resulted in fewer but larger organizations that increasingly started to shape sales processes. (Lemmens, Donaldson, Marcos 2014, 12.)

During this era different software applications, such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) amd Customer Relationship Management (CRM) together with the Internet, took a firm foothold as a part of sales processes. These tools allowed companies to develop sales towards more fact-based sales management. From the sales point of view this signified that all sales processes had to be split into distinct phases which could be analyzed more accurately. Each phase had a designated set of sales activities that systematically led the case from a lead to a closed deal. This mindset created a management style called *funnel management* where salespeople's performance ratios were constantly compared to what was considered the norm. The funnel model enabled managers to detect problems in the sales process, time and territory management. (Lemmens, Donaldson, Marcos 2014, 12-13.)

As a difference from the 90s, today globalization has led to companies having fewer, but larger customers. This also implies that the purchasing effort is centralized, and the amount of suppliers rationalized. This way organizations can grow buying power and achieve price reduction efficiently. The result is that a great amount of suppliers' revenues stream is generated by a very small number of customers. Losing one of these customers would have a direct impact on the organization's sales targets. These customers continue to evolve into what is referred to as strategic customers. (Lemmens, Donaldson, Marcos 2014, 14-15.)

As a response to this challenging phenomenon, sales organizations have developed new sales roles such as Key Account Manager and Business Development Manager. The purpose of these roles are to maintain long-term customer relationships by becoming trusted advisors for their accounts and by demonstrating a solution-driven focus. They are responsible for customer satisfaction, sales and ultimately profitability and customer value. (Lemmens, Donaldson, Marcos 2014, 14-15.)

Globalization has created more pressure to the sellers' end. Maintaining profitability often means reducing the sales force while maintaining sales revenue targets. This equation creates a conflict: organizations have to improve the relationships with their larger customers while cutting the number of salespeople. In terms of sales, this means that salespeople have to visit customers more often and, most importantly, make an impact on these visits. This development of long-lasting relationships has become a really difficult dilemma for salespeople. (Lemmens, Donaldson, Marcos 2014, 17-18.) The set of skills required from the recruited sales force is constantly becoming more complex. Selling is developing into a more and more delicate and challenging art to master.

The sales environment has become more controlled over the years, which also means that the job requires a specific type of salesperson who accepts these new ways of working. Organisations carefully adapt the profiles of the salespeople they hire to better fit the new analytical, business-oriented salesperson demanded by the customers. (Lemmens, Donaldson, Marcos 2014, 19.)

Firms in the global marketplace have started modifying their sales approach from one-time transactions that maximize profit to a more long-term approach called relationship marketing. Relationship marketing in essence means a desire to establish a long-term relationship between the customer and the seller. Once a long-term business relationship is established and nurtured, companies do not need to spend large sums on advertising to make customers aware of the product range or recruiting and using salespeople to create demand for unwanted products or services for potential customers. (Honeycutt, Ford & Simintras 2003, 9-10.)

Rapport building sets the foundation for creating credibility and trust, which are important elements for a business relationship, especially for a long-term one. Well-thought rapport building can create a great advantage in an initial sales situation as well as in a more advanced business relationship.

1.2. The client

MANIA is a two-year, multi-disciplinary research project conducted by HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences, University of Helsinki and Aalto University. The research focuses on business-to-business selling and aims to create new scientific knowledge and improved tools and methods for companies to improve their sales success. (MANIA 2016.)

The reason behind the MANIA project is the multi-layered nature of B-to-B selling, which has long been overlooked, especially in Finland, as a demanding field of selling which needs to be studied and developed systematically. MANIA examines b-to-b selling from both individual and organizational levels and tries to discover the role of emotions, hidden needs and motives that influence B-to-B selling. (MANIA 2016.)

1.3. Overview and the objective of the research

Rapport building is quite a new concept in the field of sales. It is used to describe all the actions, for both the seller and the buyer that intend to build thorough understanding between the two parties.

Relationship development has been studied comprehensively in the field of relationship marketing. Relationship marketing emphasizes relationship development but has not been able to explain the early stages of building the relationship, how to build common ground and create credibility and trust. This thesis contributes to understanding these early steps better.

1.4. Research questions

This thesis aims to answer the following questions based on the qualitative research and case studies conducted:

1. What do salespeople think about rapport building?
2. What do salespeople do to build rapport?

1.5. Keywords

Rapport - A harmonious relation or connection

Sales - The activity of selling services and products

Value - A relative worth, utility, or importance of something

Solution - The act of solving a problem or question. Can be a tailored service for example.

Long-term business relationship - Longer than a one-time sales process that provides value to both the buyer and seller parties on a consistent, ongoing basis.

B-to-B / business to business - Actions of commercial transactions between businesses

Personal selling - Face-to-face selling where the salesperson tries to convince the buyer to make a purchase

Adaptive selling – A sales method where salespeople match their behavior to the specific customer interaction encountered and adjust their actions through received feedback.

Common ground - Similarities between the buyer and seller. For example: a hobby, interest, mutual acquaintance, etc.

1.6. Structure of the thesis

This thesis has eight chapters, which consist of distinct individual themes. The first chapter indtroduces the thesis. The introduction also enlightens the past, the present and the future of selling. The second chapter is the outset of the theory part named ''Selling.'' Selling gives an explanation to the concept of sales from different angles, explaining what sales is and what is required from a salesman.

The third chapter, ''Relationship Marketing and Selling'', introduces and explains the related topics to the theme of rapport building. The chapter of relationship marketing and selling examines and scrutinizes the factors that are needed to form a successful business relationship between the buyer and the seller. This chapter involves a strong perspective from a loyalty and trust point of view, which are essential in building rapport. The fourth chapter unwraps the concept of value creation, which is an important aspect in building rapport.

The fifth chapter opens up the methodology used in this study. It provides more detailed information about the research methods. It also reviews the process of data collection and data analysis methods used in detail.

The sixth chapter answers both of the research questions in this study. The answers are formed from the collected research data. In the sixth chapter the theory and the collected data are compared and contrasted. The sixth chapter also includes the findings of this study and the new viewpoints that could be researched further. The last chapter, named ''Evaluation'', is for the reflection of the project and its process.

2. Selling

Selling is a subject that often raises a lot more discussion than any other business activity. This is quite a logical phenomenon when considering the fact that so many people directly or indirectly derive their livelihood from sales. Even people who do not work with sales by any means come into contact with it in the role of a consumer. (Jobber & Lancaster 2012, 4)

Large sums of money are being spent by companies in order to train their sales force in selling skills. This is because in many companies, salespeople are the single most important connection between the company and the customer. For many customers, the company actually personifies into the salesperson they make business with. (Jobber & Lancaster 2012, 4)

Efficient selling always requires a homogeneous sales process. The Sales process has to proceed consistently regardless of the salesperson or sales office. High standards in the sales process, which are generated of premeditated routines that the whole company follow, lead to a great customer satisfaction. (Rubanovitsch & Aalto 2007, 30)

2.1. Saleswork

According to Jobber and Lancaster the simplest explanation for the term selling is ’to make a sale.’ Making a sale sounds straightforward but is actually a very complex process that involves using a set of principles, techniques and substantial personal skills. The process of selling consists of multiple types of selling tasks. The term selling comprehends many different kinds of sales situations and activities depending on the person’s job and position in the company. (Jobber & Lancaster 2012, 4)

The principle behind selling is that sellers sell to make a profit, but the same applies also to the buyers: buyers also seek to gain profit. Buyer’s profit is measured differently, however. The seller’s formula for making profit is price minus cost of goods sold and selling costs. Buyer’s profit is the value gained from the deal. Value can be calculated withe the following equation:

Value = selling price – (cost + time and effort)

This equation can be explained further as the benefit received, or value, minus the selling price and the time and effort saved by making the deal. (Weitz, Castleberry & Tanner 2009, 30)

Compared to the past when all that was required from a salesperson were simple presentational and closing skills, today salespeople must possess a vast array of skills to compete successfully. Salespeople who do not comprehend the dynamics of these skills will be ill-equipped to handle their jobs. These skills are as follows:

- Adding value and satisfying needs
- Problem-solving and system selling
- Customer retention and deletion
- Database and knowledge management
- Customer Relationship Management
- Product marketing

(Jobber & Lancaster 2012, 5)

All-encompassing mastery of the sales process is required from a top class salesperson. A successful salesperson has to know well how to chart the customers' needs and know not only their own but also the competitors' product range thoroughly. The salesperson has to be efficient, convincing, understandable, self-imposed, polite and approachable. (Rubanovitsch & Aalto 2007, 18)

The work of a salesperson is becoming more and more tied with customer relationship management. Knowing the customer and the sales environment and combining the output of these categories efficiently are factors that are in a key position in successful sales work and customer encountering. (Rubanovitsch & Aalto 2007, 19)

2.2. Personal Selling

Personal selling can be defined as person-to-person business activity in which a salesperson has to figure out and satisfy the needs of a buyer. This should lead to a long-term benefit of both the salesperson and the buyer. In its basic form, personal selling consists of helping customers identify their problems, offering information about potential solutions and providing after-the-sale service to ensure and maintain long-term satisfaction of the buyer. These actions are often described with the term customer-centric. Customer-centric means that the salesman places the customer in the center of all their actions. (Weitz, Castleberry & Tanner 2009, 4)

Jobber & Lancaster emphasize the requirement to adapt to the customer's situation and style. Adaptive selling is an important part of personal selling. In adaptive selling salespeople match their behavior to the specific customer interaction encountered. With adaptive selling salespeople can quickly tailor their messages in response to customers' emotional reactions. (Jobber & Lancaster 2012, 269)

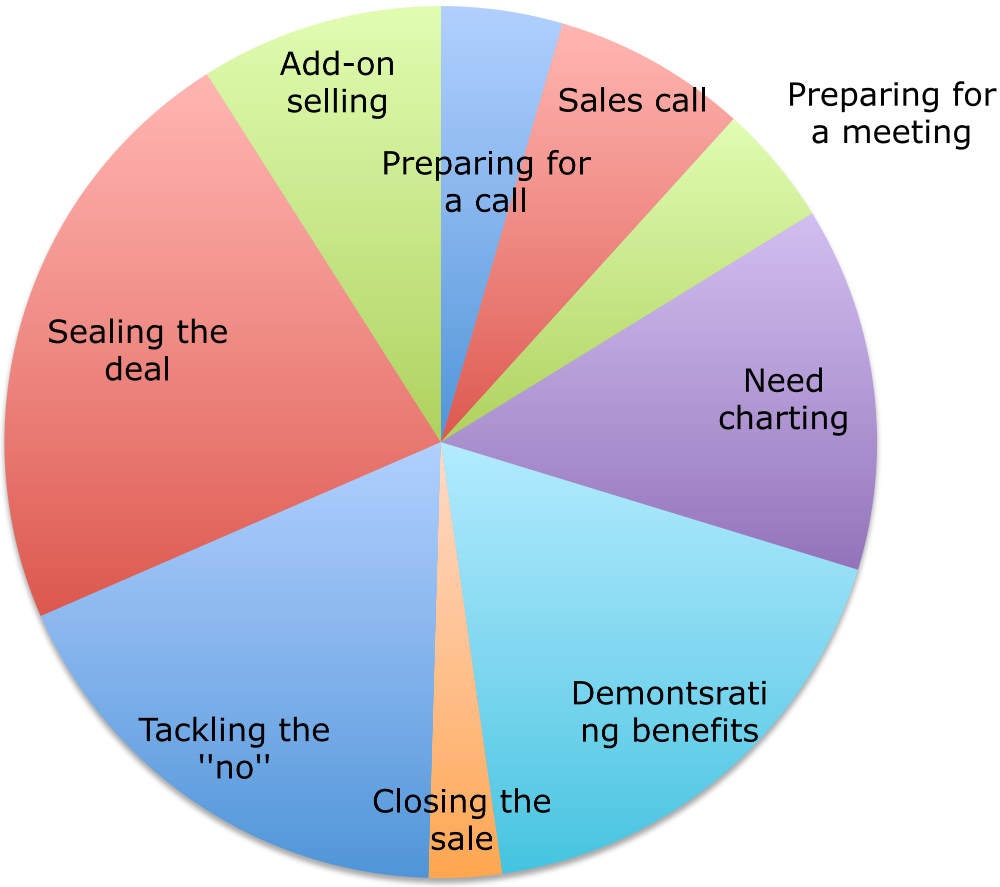
Adaptive selling also involves the skill of personal persuasion. Very seldom a product has a clear advantage over its competitors, and it is part of the salesperson's work to emphasize the product's superior and beneficial features. However, according to Jobber and Lancaster, the salesperson acts as a need-identifier and problem solver rather than as a persuasive trickster in order to build repeatable business. (Jobber & Lancaster 2012, 269)

Wisker & Poulis support Jobber's & Lancaster's (2012) views about emotions. When a salesperson engages in active listening and becomes sensitive to the feelings of the customer, they have a better ability to understand them: what is the customer's unique set of needs and problems that need to be solved? Being empathic towards customers and having the skill to extract contextual hints and adapt one's own behavior to them indicate emotional intelligence that is essential in adaptive selling. (Wisker & Poulis 2014, 37)

Weitz, Castleberry & Tanner highlight that salespeople should also adapt to the customer's desire for a specific kind of relationship. For example, a customer might not want to develop a strategic partnership but would like to maintain a relational partnership. Salespeople should transform the content and body of the sales presentation so that the customer is able to adopt the required and relevant information easily. (Weitz, Castleberry & Tanner 2009, 152)

Literature suggests that emotions play a crucial role in personal selling. Jobber & Lancaster propose that the ability to read buyers' emotions is an essential skill. Understanding, identifying and responding to emotional messages is needed to negotiate and close the sale successfully. Salespeople who possess these abilities can use this emotional information in a selling situation to their benefit. The ability to read the situation allows the salesperson to match the content and delivery style according to the potential buyer's emotional responses. (Jobber & Lancaster 2012, 270)

Rubanovitsch and Aalto (Rubanovtisch & Aalto 2007, 35) have created a simple yet illustrative graph about the essential stages of selling and the time consumed by each one of them. This model is meant to demonstrate the B-to-B environment because in Business-to-Consumer (B-to-C) selling both of the preparation stages are eliminated. Also, the customer is encountered in a shop environment so the encounter starts with noticing the customer and the first contact.



Picture 2. The Circle of sales

As the graph above illustrates, the stages that the majority believes to be the actual selling part are the most time-efficient stages of the process: the sales call, the meeting and closing the sale. Convincing the customer and making the actual contract are the most time-consuming stages with the addition of add-on selling. This clearly contrasts with the stereotype of the sales process that most people have.

3. Relationship marketing and selling

Relationship marketing is a term with several definitions, but they all refer to companies' attempts to build better and stronger relationships with their customers. The logic behind the relationship marketing is four-fold:

1. Loyal customers buy more
2. Loyal customers pay more
3. Loyal customers influence their friends to buy
4. Loyal customers are essential help in developing new products

Building loyalty is the key to a strong, successful relationship. The term loyalty comprehends two different concepts: behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. Behavioral loyalty means that the customer keeps buying the same product from the same vendor over time. Attitudinal loyalty is an emotional bond between the customer and for example a brand, salesperson or company. The ideal customer for a company is loyal both in the behavioral and attitudinal sense and stays as a customer forever. (Weitz, Castleberry & Tanner 2009, 32)

Relationship selling could be described as a way to secure and build up the relationships that are formed through relationship marketing (Weitz, Castleberry & Tanner 2009, 34). Relationship selling focuses on the interaction between the buyer and the salesperson rather than the product's price and details. Consumer loyalty increases as the result of the familiarity and the personality of the salesperson. Relationship selling is a gateway to long-term relationships. Making the sale is only the beginning of a succesful customer acquisition and not its goal. (Relationship Selling: Definition, Process and Techniques)

Marvin Jolson (1997, 76) defines relationship selling in his article *Broadening the Scope of Relationship Selling* as follows: Instead of selling being a chain of hardships that the salesperson has to win in order to achieve a steady stream of prospects and customers of different sizes and shapes, relationship selling aims for the building of mutual trust between buyer and seller with a delivery of long-term, value-added benefits for buyers. The philosophy of relationship selling guides companies to abandon short-term transactions (individual sale) thinking. Instead of making individual sales, companies should build alliances, long-term relationships and other collaborative arrangements with selected customers whenever possible.

Negotiation and relationship building are necessary for a successful long-term business relationship. Negotiating is also an inevitable task in the salesperson's job. Only through negotiations buyers and sellers can build strong, long-term relationships with improved results and build rapport effectively. Accountable and honest salespeople who care about customers' business increase the value of the relationship. The quality of the partnership salespeople build with the customer is at least as important as the product or service they sell. This requires constant adaptation to the customer's buying needs, if at all possible. (Honeycutt, Ford & Simintras 2003, 259-260.)

There is a good amount of theory written about relationship marketing and relationship selling. However, there is only a fraction of empirical research on these subjects. This thesis is meant to specify the preliminary stages of interaction in relationship selling which then leads to the actual relationship selling. This thesis also creates a new framework to support the field of relationship marketing and selling based on empirical material.

4. Rapport building in relationship development

Trust is a key component in advancing and developing a relationship. Rapport building contributes to developing trust and a sense of connection. (Morgan & Hunt 1994) Creating a strong mental bond with the customer, a salesperson has a better chance to develop the relationship from a profit-maximizing one-time transaction to a more profitable long-term relationship as Honeycutt, Ford & Simintras suggest (2003).

Early phases of the sales process are extremely critical in how the business relationship will develop. Everything the salesperson does in the beginning of the sales process affects his or her credibility later. (Manning, Ahearne & Reece 2012) With carefully constructed rapport building, issues involving credibility problems can be eliminated.

Existing literature has modelled the effect that rapport has but has not explained how it is built (Campbell 2006). This creates an interesting situation when considering a cause-and-effect type of equation where the effect has been studied a lot but the cause has been left in a grey area. This thesis contributes to understanding the cause how rapport is developed and built.

5. Methodology

This research was conducted making use of qualitative research methods. The qualitative method that was adapted to this research was a case study. The data used in the study was collected utilizing narrative interviews. The following chapter compares the differences and similarities between qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative research methods selected for this study are scrutinized more closely. Additionally, The body of the interviews, data collection and the processes used to analyze the data are explained.

5.1. Research methods

Quantitative and qualitative methods are the two most common and used research methods. The difference of the two lies in the collection process of the data and the form in which the data generates. Qualitative research emphasizes the understanding of, for example, a phenomenon. Also, the approach to data analysis is more rational and interpretational. Quantitative research is more scrutinizing and critical and it is also considered as the more logicoriented method. (Ghauri & Grønhaug 1995, 85-86.)

This research was made with qualitative methods by carrying out narrative interviews. Quantitative methods, for example in a form of surveys, could have been used. The goal of this research, however, is to gain and broaden the understanding of a vaguely researched theme, and does not pursue to test hypotheses or theories. There is literature about customer relations in general and customer relationship management but they both involve little understanding of the behavior or actions how salespeople build rapport.

The objective of this research is to find the methods that salesmen use to build rapport, especially in new sales encounters, and how they themselves comprehend their actions in the B-to-B field. This way building customer relationships can be scrutinized more carefully and the actual actions of the salespeople can be indicated through repeating patterns in behavior.

The relatively small amount of interviews can be considered as a limitation in this study and could be argued to affect the robustness of the findings. However, the answers obtained provide support for the theory found in the literature, also expanding it, and seek to illustrate the repetitive phenomena in salespeople's behavior regarding relationship development.

5.2. Data collection and analysis

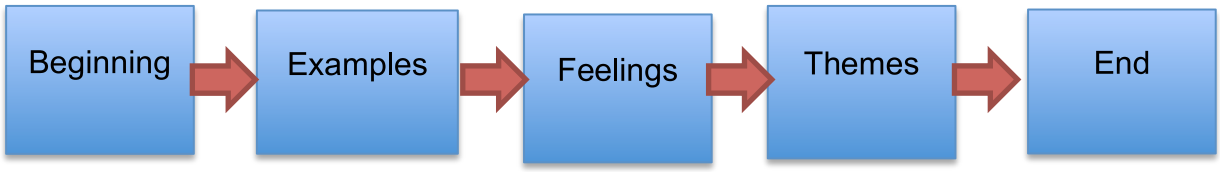
This study uses data from interviews that were done face-to-face by a separate team of researchers. The interviews were 76 minutes long on average and were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. The analysis in this thesis is based on the transcribed Microsoft Word documents using a content analysis method including eight (8) salesperson interviews in total from three (3) different companies.

Content analysis scrutinizes the data by categorizing it and tries to seek similarities and differences in the content. Like discourse analysis, content analysis is also based on text analysis that examines textual content or contents that are converted into text, for example in the form of books, diaries, interviews, speeches and conversations. Content analysis pursues to form a summary of the phenomenon researched. Subsequently, it aims to link the results of the study to the broader context of the phenomenon and other findings related to the subject. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 105)

Table 1. List of interviewees

Company's name	**Company's business**	**Company size**	**Interviewee's title**
Company X	Data management & manufacturing	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Business Consultant
Company X	Data management & manufacturing	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Business Consultant
Company X	Data management & manufacturing	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Account Manager
Company Y	Digital business solutions	Small (Under 100 employees)	Account Manager
Company Y	Digital business solutions	Small (Under 100 employees)	Sales Manager & Founder
Company Y	Digital business solutions	Small (Under 100 employees)	Chief Operative Officer
Company Z	Personnel services & outsourcing	Large (Over 500 employees)	Sales Manager
Company Z	Personnel services & outsourcing	Large (Over 500 employees)	Key Account Manager

The questions in the interview were formed in a way that the interviewees themselves could steer the interview to the topics they wanted to talk about most. The questions were carefully formed so that the interviewees were not easily able to answer without elaborating. This means that the data gathered from the interviews was from a broad field as the questions truly pushed the interviewees to ponder upon them There were two kinds of questions, somemore narrative and others semi-structured. These types were again sub-categorized depending on the part of the interview in which they were asked. The interviews were structured as follows:



Picture 1. The structure of the interview

These question categories gave the interview a consistent structure and were used in the same order in each interview. In the beginning, the interviewee was asked to informally tell about his or her background, work history and their current role. Then the interviewee was asked to recall specific sales and sales situations that had gone especially well or badly. The third part dealt with the interviewee's feelings towards sales work in general.

The fourth part was reserved for theme questions, including specific questions about rapport building. Theme questions were for example: *How do you create personal connection and rapport? What is important in selling? What is the role of rapport building?* In the end the interviewee was asked if he or she had anything to add or if they wished to expand on any of the points discussed.

6. Results

This chapter introduces the results of the interviews and answers both of the research questions separately. The questions are answered considering the scope of this thesis, focusing on the early stages of the relationship rather than closed sales and financial success. Lastly, a summary of the key ideas emerging from the answers is provided.

The most frequent themes that came up in the answers can be seen in tables 2 and 3. These were separated into two categories in order to answer the research questions. Tables 2 and 3 show the common themes that emerged from the salespeoples' answers regarding rapport building. Table 3 depicts the actions salespeople take to build rapport.

The themes are discussed in their own question areas. In addition to the results, the sections also contain quotes and parts of the discussions from the research data in order to better support and illustrate the results. The quotes have been selected so that they clearly and effectively depict the theme in question. This makes the results easier for the reader to comprehend.

The themes in the 'Thought' column form the basis to answer the first research question 'What do salespeople think about rapport building?'' The basis to answer the second research question 'What do salespeople do to build rapport?'' can be found in Table 3, in the 'Action' column.

6.1. What do salespeople think about rapport building?

In order to answer this research question, the interviewees' key ideas on sales were divided into different categories. These questions were for example: *What do you regard as the most important factor in making a sale? What is your sales philosophy?*

THOUGHT	DEFINITION
Preparation	Methods salespeople use to prepare for the initial meeting
Listening	Listening to the customer
Optimism	Positive thinking
Interest in the customer	Showing the customer that you care
Self-confidence	Believing in yourself
Empathy	The ability to put oneself in the customer's shoes

Table 2. Interviewees' personal opinions on sales

Preparation

Preparation plays a big role in building rapport, especially when considering the initial contact with the potential customer. By preparing well, the salesperson can make a great first impression on the customer that will enhance credibility and trust.

The salespeople interviewed stated they use available data to study potential customers on a regular basis before going to an appointment, for example by gathering relevant information from various documents available and even from social media, for example the networking tool LinkedIn. In the interviews, the Internet proved to be the most used source for preparation data.

The documents used for preparation varied a lot. Sometimes the salesforce is able to get hold of the customer's own marketing material to shed more light on their business and processes. Of course, marketing material does not often reveal the problems in the customer's processes. Other documents used can be publications that handle a certain area of business.

"I visit the customer's website to get a grip on what kind of business they do. Then I check the turnover, the amount of employees, the organizational structure and so on. Just because I don't want to create the customer a thought that I don't know what the customer does." (Company Z, Sales Manager)

"If you get a sales meeting with for example a Secretary of State you have to know the political volition behind the meeting before you go there. There is a huge amount of preparation and background work that we all have to do." (Company Y, Sales Manager & Founder)

Listening

Many of the salespeople considering listening to be the most essential skill that a salesperson can possess. The consensus among the salespeople was that successful rapport building is mostly about listening the customer and finding the right pieces of information between the lines.

There were also references which indicated that an important part of listening is forgetting your own interest in the sale and fully concentrating on the customer. The salesperson's own motives behind the sale can ultimately lead to a solution which is not the best for the customer. This might result in dissatisfaction and certainly not in a long-term business relationship.

Listening can also reveal why the customer is thinking about buying from the salesperson's and the company in question. This can be a powerful asset because if figured out, it provides an opportunity to differentiate from the competition even further. This will lead to increased customer trust.

"And the art to listen to people can't be stressed enough when thinking about building trust." (Company X, Business Consultant)

"I think that the most essential skill that a salesman can possess is listening to the customer, this certain type of social intelligence. – When you listen to the customer you learn to notice the customer's feelings and emotions in the situation and what the customer really is after. Is the need really what the customer just said or is it something in the background." (Company Y, Chief Operative Officer)

Optimism

The interviewees saw optimism as a creative force in building rapport. The salesperson's persistent attitude can lead to a solid rapport and a healthy customer relationship. An optimistic state of mind gives the salespeople the strength to handle failed contacts and to build rapport from there to finally close the sale. Pressure from the companies in the form of sales goals can represent a significant burden for the salesforce. Optimism encourages salespeople to focus on the essential and put the pressures aside.

Optimism combined with self-confidence is a source of positive energy for salespeople. The ability to believe in oneself, coupled with the ability to think that events will turn to positive from negative, is a strong tool for motivating oneself to give one's all for the job.

"But I like to think that doing your best and proving your skills that way I have no alternative options." (Company X, Business Consultant)

"Persistence is required a lot. You don't have fast buck in this business. Very seldom the chance (to sell) opens up in the first meeting. We just have to cope and carry on." (Company Z, Sales Manager)

”I thought to myself that ’damn, I’m all alone here. How can I keep the situation under my control.’ But then I calmed myself down. I said to myself that ’hey, this shouldn’t go like this, just try to settle. Do what you can, in the way you've always done’.” (Company Z, Key Account Manager)

Interest in the customer

Like with true caring, the interviewees were of the opinion that a genuine interest in the customer can make a difference in building rapport. According to the interviewees, in a customer meeting the salesperson should be active and ask questions regarding both the customer’s processes and the solution offered. This gives the customer the picture that the salesperson really wants to understand their business and the critical aspects involved in it.

A point that many salespeople thought was useful and should be used more was to ask the customer about the worries they might have regarding the sale. Giving a straight answer to the customer’s worries and challenges can be extremely beneficial in building rapport. For example, the customer might have had a bad experience with the previous solution provider and therefore be reluctant about the sale. Removing these kinds of barriers can turn a cumbersome situation around completely.

After the sale it was thought beneficial to map out the outcome of the sold solution for different parts of the customer’s business. This proves for the customer that the salesperson does not only want a good hit-and-run kind of sale, but wants to further develop and evaluate the solution.

”But as I said in the beginning I try to side with the customer. I often realize that I’m defending our customer’s side inside our company too.” (Company X, Account Manager)

”I side with the customer quite easily. I really try to find the best solution for the customer and aim for a final result that I can be proud of. So that I can walk straight-backed there a year after the sale. Or go sell there something new after two years or a week.” (Company X, Account Manager)

Self-confidence

In the interviews, salespeople emphasize that self-confidence is one of the essential factors they have to possess. Self-confidence was not explicit in their answers but was one of the factors that had to be read between the lines. Almost all of the interviewees showed a great amount of self-confidence and trusted their own capabilities to handle their job.

Self-confidence can be noticed from various things. The interviewees often showed passion for challenge and for solving the customer's problems. In addition, the interviewees were confident in their abilities to sell themselves to the customer's organization and to turn negative experiences and prejudices into positive ones.

Independence was another quality that came up frequently: the salespeople interviewed usually liked their co-workers and had respect for them, but they liked to handle as much as they could themselves. These examples are illustrative of the interviewees' idenpendence and self-confidence:

"My job is really independent. I do my schedule myself. – I shuttle here and there and do whatever I see is the important and necessary thing to do." (Company Z, Key Account Manager)

"Well, I'm really profit-oriented and often concerned about the company and its profitability. I've done a lot of projects and I feel that I can handle a project all by myself if necessary. I think that gives me some kind of credibility that I don't need to consult for example production to answer the customer's questions about technical questions. I can tell straight away if something is or isn't possible." (Company Y, Account Manager)

Empathy

The interviewees considered empathy an important skill in selling. The ability to step into someone else's shoes represents a strong advantage when building rapport. Honesty and the need to serve the customer as personally and as well as possible are strongly linked to empathy.

Regarding the role of empathy in rapport building, the interviewees gave various different perspectives. Firstly, they believed that showing care for the customer is important as this kind of a demonstration of honesty can make the customer reflect positively on the salesperson/sales situation. Even if the customer in question is a challenging one, true caring will come across in the end.

Another point involving caring is that many salespeople want to show the customer that their company can be flexible instead of adhering to strict rules and contracts. Demonstrating this kind of a soft business culture builds rapport effectively because at times the customer will be more constructive in the sales situation when the they know there is some space to negotiate.

Finally, almost all of the interviewees feel immense personal pride in the deals they are able toclose. This means that the salespeople do not only want to be a good option for the customer – they want to be the best solution for them. The companies involved in this research did not represent the cheapest possible option for their customers. Just like true and honest caring, tailoring the best solution for the customer will have a positive effect, as demonstrated by these comments:

''In my opinion, we are better than most competitors because we are more honest and pay more regard to the customer. So we care about the customer. Often, or at least what I've heard, in a tight place our competitors don't give in at all and hold firmly to the contract. So they are a little short-sighted about it. Our company's culture is softer and harmonious in it's own way and we want to care about the customer. -- Caring about the customer is our way to do business.'' (Company X, Account Manager)

''It has to be the customer again. I really want to produce them great results and help them. Sometimes I commit too hard to serve the customer really well and all the way. I feel huge personal responsibility about what I've sold. If I've promised to help them with this and that I definitely will make sure personally that everything happens as promised, no matter what. The greatest joy of this all are the happy customers. It's so nice to be able to help.'' (Company Y, Account Manager)

6.2. What do salespeople do to build rapport?

The categories created for this research question were derived from the example stories and situations mentioned by the interviewees, as opposed to the first research question - what do salespeople think about rapport building - for which the categories were deduced from the salespeople's personal thoughts on selling.

ACTION	DEFINITION
Mental orientation	Methods to maximize focus in meetings
Active listening	Reacting to what the customer is saying
Increase satisfaction	Boosting your organization's status in the customer's mind
Find common ground	Finding common interests with the customer
Remove negativity	Removing customer's negative feelings
Identifying the buyer's personality & adapting	Connecting with the customer on a personal level

Table 3. Actions for building rapport as suggested by interviewees

Mental orientation

Mental orientation includes all the methods that help salespeople maximize their focus on the meeting or sales situation. This also involves practices that get the salespeople in a happy, positive and energetic state of mind.

Music was considered the most influential factor when blocking negative feelings and increasing positive ones. Music was also used to relax for upcoming challenging situations and to gather and maximize energy.

''It's more about the music. Music gives me a really good feeling. With music you can relax or you can boost yourself to the edge of rage or whatever. It definitely is music. Now the radio station Loop plays this song Fireball all the time. That song gives me such good vibes. It's always playing full throttle in my car. – It just gives you the feeling that I can, I'm able to and know my stuff.'' (Company X, Business Consultant)

”One day I said to my colleague: to go in front of a mirror and smile to yourself. Then say to yourself: I’m top class. And then shout hello to yourself. Just because of that the situation can turn around completely. All of a sudden, there in the mirror, is some smiling and happy person. That way you automatically start to smile and get in a good mood.” (Company Z, Key Account Manager)

Active listening

Active listening includes all techniques the salesperson uses to react to what the customer says. Active listening shows that the salesperson is present in the current situation and interested in it. With active listening, the salesperson can show the customer that they are really putting their mind to the meeting or sales situation.

Active listening, along with finding common ground, was one of the most commonly used techniques the interviewees used to build rapport. Almost all of the interviewees spoke in a way that showed excellent active listening and people skills. Most of the interviewees were also open and extroverted by nature, which can be considered as an asset when it comes to active alistening.

Active listening appears in multiple ways in the interviews. For example, company X’s business consultant showed the customer respect by acknowledging his comment and developing the idea further. This created a situation where the customer felt needed and important. In this particular case, this worked particularly well inbuilding rapport. On the other hand, company Y’s sales manager listened actively to his customer and built a solution for them little by little based on the customer’s thoughts about challenges they were facing. This way the customer got a feeling that the salesperson really tried to get to the bottom of their processes in order to find the best solution. These are two completely different ways to practice active listening, yet both succeeded in reaching the same goal.

”I said to him: as a thought that is extremely intriguing, we really have to think about that. What I did was that I gripped to his comment because when a customer throws something you haven’t thought at all to you like that, it can be a great thought to push forward. That way whole new worlds can open up and you can build something really special and new.” (Company X, Business Consultant)

”Of course you have to respect the customer’s decisions, also in the manner that you don’t push the customer too aggressively. Listening, understanding, creating different

options and also that you challenge the customer in the right way. You have to search for the solution for the customer.'' (Company Z, Sales Manager)

Increase satisfaction

The meaning of increasing satisfaction varies depending on the situation. It may for example refer to boosting your organization's status in the mind of the client with good references, talking to the customer about additional services your organization offers or taking some other advantage of the situation when possible. The salesperson has to be creative in how to increase satisfaction.

Well-timed attempts to increase positive feelings based on added value indicated to help when building rapport. This effect was on display in several interviews. For example, company Z's key account manager often brings up in meetings that they also have an accommodation service from which the customer would benefit. The accommodation service is not under the key account manager's area of business, but bringing it up enhances the customer's positive feelings about the firm and might increase company Z's income.

In another example, company Z's key account manager would bring up a surprising fact to increase satisfaction. The key is that the customer was already content with the information they got, but the salesperson would increase satisfaction further. By informing the customer that Company Z's offer is all-inclusive which means that the solution they offer does not have any extra costs attached. The customer was expecting to have to pay extra for certain services because that is how the process advances with all of company Z's competitors.

''Q: Do you sell your company's other services as well? Do you see it as an advantage? A: Yeah, the accommodation service Brand A. I might ask the customer briefly if they use any accommodation services. It's good advertisement for us to let the customer know we have an accommodation service too. Others haven't even heard that Brand A is a part of Company Z. They might say ''oh yeah we have done collaboration with them, didn't know Forenom is your service too,'' And that's how mentioning Forenom turns into a positive link.'' (Company Z, Key Account Manager)

''The way I see it is that first and foremost you build the relationship. The icing on the cake is when I tell the customer that the offer is all-inclusive, that with us you don't have to pay extra for anything. Many customers are positively surprised with this. Many of them have

experienced paying for something extra that hasn't been mentioned.'' (Company Z, Key Account Manager)

Find common ground

Especially when selling products and not services, finding common ground with the buyer was thought to be an effective way in building rapport. Finding common ground means that the seller tries to find common interests, mutual acquaintances or other similarities with the buyer. Hobbies and mutual acquaintances were those mentioned most often by the interviewees. They explained that common ground could be found through engaging in small-talk with the buyer and from external references.

For example, one of the interviewees is a car-enthusiast and his sales tactic was to make small-talk about cars. He had noticed that many the people he meets like to talk about cars and other motor vehicles, so discussing them allowed him to connect with the buyer on apersonal level and build rapport efficiently.

In another illustrative example, one of the interviewees had a difficult customer but by changing his approach from an informative style to small-talke, he succeeded in building rapport well. It turned out that they both liked Thailand and traveling, which was the connecting factor here, and in the end he managed to build a profitable relationship out of the case

Overall, the interviewees believed that finding common ground was an effective way of building rapport:

''I'm very enthusiastic about cars. When I meet people face to face the conversation shifts to cars and other things where we connect. That way I try to find the way to start the conversation about document management and ask if the customer would like to control their documents better.'' (Company X, Account Manager)

''One salesman said to me that it is no use to go there, you'll be left with empty hands. I said that I have to because the customer is on my account. I booked a meeting and we discussed the actual business in about five minutes. An hour and a half we talked about this and that and I got a huge package of information about their company's business, who makes the decisions and what kind of decisions are made. Now we have planned next appointment in April. And all of this because we talked about driving and repairing motorcycles. That's my way to dig up the information.'' (Company X, Business Consultant)

Remove negativity

Like increasing satisfaction, removing negativity is a concept that can vary a lot depending on the situation. They key factor is to break the customer's reservations that may negatively affect the meeting or sales situation. As already discussed in the section 'interest in the customer', the barriers to be broken can for example be previous negative experiences with competitors which contribute to the customer's lack of trust.

''When you have contacted and seen the customer and talked with the customer it is really easy after that to build the connection because then you are kind of acquaintances already. Some customers have prejudices and unsuccessful, personal experiences from the past which can create bogeymen and negative feelings. Removing those bogeymen together is a good way to build up a healthier relationship.'' (Company Z, Key Account Manager)

''I listen to the challenge and the problem the customer has. Or whatever the customer tells me. Then I come to his side of the table and try to show, like, hand in hand that let's do it this way. Then you have a good solution right there.'' (Company X, Account Manager)

Identifying the buyer's personality and adapting

Identifying the buyers' personality was thought to be one of the key factors in moving the relationship forward. The interviewees had often faced situations where the buyer's and the seller's chemistries were on different levels, meaning that negotiations could not proceed in the absenceof a common approach to the sales process.

The buyer's personality was often scrutinized by analyzing their way of talking, participation in the negotiation, sense of humor and body language. Most of the interviewees appared to have plenty of experience in analyzing their customers. The salespeople also showed a great deal of self-awareness: if they didn't have the correct chemistry with the buyer, they would rather hand the case over to a colleague than try to force it through.

In these kinds of situations, the salesperson would often bring along a colleague to advance the negotiations, usually someone that the original seller knew to have a good chemistry with the buyer. One of the interviewees told that in their organization, in these cases they also pass on any relevant information about the lead to the new salesperson.. This way someone else can turn the lead into a sale.

Just a change in chemistry allowed turning near-catastrophic cases into very profitable sales and long-term relationships. Every buyer is a different person with a different nature, which is one of the key factors for companies to consider in order to close even more successful deals.

”Chemistry plays a big role. When we do first appointments, especially with prospects with more potential, we go to the meeting as pairs. In the very beginning we already check which one of us will take the lead. Sometimes you just know that now my chemistry didn’t meet with the client’s at all.” (Company Z, Sales Manager)

”Some people get along better with certain contacts. In this kind of situation it’s of course possible to escort a new person to the case. This way the people who get along naturally do more co-operation.” (Company Y, Chief Operative Officer)

7. Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to create a deeper understanding of the activities that salespeople do in order to build rapport with the customer, and how their thoughts about rapport building translate into actions. This section brings forth the conclusions and findings of the thesis and also suggests further areas of research.

7.1. Conclusions

Jobber and Lancaster (2012) state that salespeople are the single most important connection between the company and the customer. The study supports this conclusion as the views and attitudes of the sales force create the final impression of the company with the customer. The salespeople interviewed demonstrated to have high self-confidence that will ultimately transmit a competent image of the company to the customer.

Rubanovitsch & Aalto (2007) highlight the need for a standardized process in order to achieve efficient sales. This is true when considering the company on a macro level, but on an individual level this might not be the case. Even if the basic sales process is the same throughout the organization, the way individual salespeople go about persuading the customer can differ a lot. The actions taken to build rapport at different stages of the process, from the first contact to developing the relationship and closing the sale, vary a lot between salespeople.

Rubanovitsch & Aalto (2007) also discuss the fact that in order to succeed, a great salesperson has to know the customer, the sales environment and not only their own product range but also that of the competitors thoroughly in order to succeed. The interviews provide strong support for this statement as many of the interviewees demonstrated extensive knowledge of the sales environment, their competitors' product range and efficient techniques for countering any positive views customers may have of their competitors.

The interviews seem to indicate the salespeople aim to build long-term business relationships rather than make 'hit-and-run' type fast one-time sale. The template of a need-identifier and problem solver proposed by Jobber & Lancaster (2012) fit all of the interviewees well. The salespeople interviewed took great pride in their job and appeared to honestly care about their customers even on a personal level. The intentions of truly helping the customer in the initial meetings was evident in anecdotes presenting upgrades and improvements to the customer's current processes.

The different actions taken to build rapport were all apparent, with active listening standing out as the most used technique. This fact supports Jobber's & Lancaster's (2012) statement that understanding, identifying and responding to the customer's emotional messages are needed to negotiate and close the sale successfully.

The findings of this thesis could well be used in business or sales coaching. There is an abundance of sales coaching conferences and services dealing with effective ways of selling, but they actually bring nothing groundbreaking to the table. Identifying one's strengths in rapport building and nurturing them can allow many salespeople to achieve better results in selling, as well as building and managing long-term business relationships. This, of course, also implies discovering one's weaknesses in this area in order to practice and thus improve.

In essence, the results depict how to build business relationships more effectively. In practice they could be used to design different kinds of coaction and interaction-based exercises or coaching for sales personnel in order to strengthen their rapport building abilities.

7.2. Follow-up research suggestions

The scope of this thesis was limited to the verbal side of rapport building as the used data was taken from interview recordings. Furthermore, the interviews only dealt with the sales personnel's thoughts and actions. This leaves many opportunities for further investigation in the field of rapport building.

The interviews used in this study give insight into how salespeople themselves think of sales situations. However, as the interviewees were asked to reflect upon past situations, essential information may be lost – thus observing real-life action would offer new insights.

There are several ways that further research regarding rapport building could be conducted. A logical route would be to analyze how non-verbal actions enhance rapport building as this thesis only deals with the spoken word. Non-verbal actions could be examined through videotaped sales meetings and situations.

The study of rapport building does not need to be limited to the area of business administration. For example, the field of sychology could further our understanding of how certain verbal and non-verbal actions work positively in sales meetings.

The findings of this study are limited in their generalizability as they were derived from a limited number of interviews with sales personnel without considering the views of clients. A deeper understanding of rapport building would require contacting customers and analyzing their opinions on the matter.

When analyzing the available data it became apparent that the described rapport building actions were used in somewhat different business sectors. This provides an interesting approach for further research: what techniques do salespeople in different sectors use to build rapport with the customer?

8. Evaluation

This chapter discusses process of writing the thesis. First, the progression and the timeline of the thesis are explained. Subsequently the learning process involved in making of the thesis is clarified.

8.1. Progression of the thesis

The process for the thesis began in March 2015. After a couple of months I had an approximate sketch of the subject and after reading the thesis material I roughly knew how to construct the thesis. This was in the summer of 2015.

During the summer I came up with a plan for the main chapters of the thesis. It took about a month to sketch the subchapters as I had to broaden my knowledge of the subject. At this time I also made some changes to the main chapters. .

After coming up with the outline of the chapters I read a lot of new material regarding the thesis and studied the themes in more detail. Over the autumn of 2016 I wrote the first draft of the chapters. During August and October I made changes to the chapters and paragraphs to aim them better frame them within the scope, and also stylized the text.

Looking back on my progress, it would have been possible to write the thesis faster but considering the circumstances under which it was made I am satisfied with the result. My initial plan to graduate before Christmas 2015 did not materialize which was as a source of frustration and pressure for me. It took me a while to gather myself after the disappointment, but once I did, everything went quite smoothly and I managed to finish my thesis by the second deadline I had set myself for Christmas 2016.

8.2. Learning process

The process for this thesis started in March 2015, when I began investigating and contacting several companies and brands about writing a thesis for them on marketing and sales. This proved to be a rather difficult task as the companies I was interested in working with were difficult to get in touch with. Soon after this I was contacted by the MANIA project coordinator and given the opportunity to write my thesis for them. After a few meetings with him I started to form a clearer idea of the subject.

After formulating the research questions the thesis got actually really interesting. The subject was fresh and from a field in which very little research had been done. I soon began to understand that this was a pioneering topic and something which will be vital for the understanding of sales in the future. The themes of rapport building, relationship development and B-to-B were already familiar to me from the courses I had studied, and it was interesting to deepen my understanding of these topics.

Many of my colleagues, friends and relatives dealing with sales showed an avid interest in the subject, which inspired me to delve even deeper into it. Throughout my career I have held positions involved sales, customer relations and marketing, so I also an interest in the topic from a professional perspective.

Time management proved to be the most difficult challenge during the. The time-consuming nature of my job and certain difficulties I was facing were the main reason the thesis was advancing slowly, and I was not able to make the thesis a priority until the autumn of 2016 when I changed jobs. Before that I could only dedicate brief moments here and there for writing which made progress very slow. From the autumn of 2016, things started to move forward quite well but looking back I feel I still could have focused more on the process.

Despite the difficulties and the time taken to write the thesis I am proud of what I've accomplished and the work I have done. In my new job I will benefit greatly from the knowledge gained which is a big advantage, and I would not reject the possibility of doing more research on the subject in the future.

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