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DOUBTS AND RISKS IN THE BUYING AND PURCHASING PROCESSES OF BUSINESS BUYERS

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Abstract: This paper aims to reveal the nature of doubts and risks that may cause business buyers to resist making a purchasing decision or proceeding in the business-to-business (B2B) buying process. Much sales literature has focused on B2B value creation and the sales process, but less studied is the buyers' buying process and business buyers' feelings concerning the doubts and risks associated with buying. This paper makes an empirical contribution to this debate using twenty-one in-depth interviews with business buyers, analysed using qualitative methods. The study reveals that the doubts and risks experienced are essential elements of the business buyers' buying process, as the buyers appreciate salespeople who clearly recognise, raise and minimise the doubts and risks that buyers encounter during the process.

Keywords: B2B Sales, Business Buyer, Buying and Purchasing Process, Customer Interaction, Sales Process, Types of Risks and Doubts

1 Introduction

In business-to-business (B2B) sales research, although value creation is well covered there are few studies examining the subject from the interactional point of view. Researchers (Lingreen & Wynsta 2005) have called for value creation studies of ongoing processes between buyers and sellers, as less is known about the buyers' concepts and experiences of the buying processes (Salomonson *et al.* 2011). The sales literature is focused on salespeople and sales organisations, and there is little research related to the doubts and risks that B2B buyers experience during their buying process, and a dearth of studies about the expectations of business buyers before or during buyer-seller interactions. Some writers (e.g. Hautamäki 2015, Salomonson *et al.* 2011) have reviewed these topics, and emphasised them as essential to the buyers' buying process and behaviour. The more commonly studied sales process

differs significantly from the buying process, despite them being different sides of the same coin.

We argue that the supposed doubts and risks, and their resolution, are core elements in interactional and collaborative value co-creation encounters. Additionally, the complexity of today's business environments means sales has become a relational process in which the attending person defines and supports customers' needs identification. This is why salespeople need to adapt to their customers, possess the skills required to accurately identify customers' needs and be able to carry out unplanned adjustments during sales interactions. Companies seek a competitive advantage by building long-term relationships, and often the only link to the buyer is the salesperson (Blocker *et al.* 2012, Dixon & Tanner 2012, Haas *et al.* 2012, Homburg *et al.* 2009, Jones *et al.* 2005, Spiro & Weitz 1990, Rodriguez *et al.* 2014, Tuli *et al.* 2007, Weitz *et al.* 1986). In these circumstances, the experienced doubts and risks might halt the progress of the buying process, despite the evident personal and business benefits for the buyers.

In B2B sales research, few studies take the buyers' perspective. Additionally, the value-creation literature often concentrates on the sales organisations and relies on conceptual studies. Because the value-creation literature has not been able to define the value in practice, few studies define the role of value in interactions between buyer and seller. In this study, value creation is seen as an interactive and relational process between buyer and seller. This interactive process that focuses on doubts and risks is also seen to bring value to both participants in the interaction (Galvagno & Dalli 2014, Grönroos 2008, Hohenschwert 2012, Salomonson *et al.* 2012).

The business buyers in this study are defined as customers who meet salespeople in B2B buyer-seller encounters and who have direct or indirect roles in their organisations' purchasing processes. The study focuses on sales encounters where the business buyers have physically met salespeople and have experience of the competencies, capabilities and behaviours of several salespeople. The doubts and risks here involve the cognitive, emotional, latent or emerging experiences of the business buyers as humans as they engage in buyer-seller encounters (see e.g. Blocker *et al.* 2012, Pink 2012, Tracy 2014), although they also have a professional role and position in meetings. The main research aim is to resolve how business buyers view the doubts and risks in buyer-seller encounters, and how salespeople should communicate the potential doubts and risks.

2 Related research

The target of salespeople in sales meetings is to build a common understanding of the business benefits and value with the buyers; in other words, salespeople must be able to generate something new and valuable together with the buying organisation. In the sales literature (e.g. Hautamäki 2015, Rapp *et al.* 2014, Tuli *et al.* 2007, Walter *et al.* 2001), trust and relationships are described as important concepts with a significant role in sales success. Such trust and relationships ensure that both parties seem to have common interests in proceeding in the sales case, but not necessarily in closing the final deal. The B2B sale is often a process that requires several encounters or meetings. From the first contact between salespeople and buyers, the sales process continues to new meetings or, for example, arranging a presentation for board members. Additionally, the buyer organisation may be interested in further negotiations to determine and concretise benefits and implement the requirements of the solution or service. The salespeople and buyers work together to develop ways in which the sales discourse progresses from value proposal and agreement to implementation and usage phases (Haas *et al.* 2011). Hence, the salespeople are not necessarily trying to influence the buyers directly (Rapp *et al.* 2014). Instead, they help the buyers to co-invent the best possible ways to proceed in the sales case. Therefore, the sales process should be seen as a collaborative value co-creation process that not only involves the

creation of new knowledge and practices, but also the process of minimising uncertainty and implementation risks.

Studies reveal that reaching a mutual understanding and agreement may in turn be vital to customers' value creation (Salomonson *et al.* 2012). This means that salespeople need to possess, among other skills, quality interpersonal skills that enable them to address the business buyers' doubts and risks. If the salespeople are unable to build a common understanding, it may halt the buying process. Concerning the buyer-seller interactions and buyers' expectations, buyers appreciate confidence and a perceived similarity in behaviours with the salesperson. It is reasonable to think that salespeople need to believe they are good sellers and possess the abilities required to be successful in interactions with buyers, such as Bandura's (1986) definition of a confident person in his agency model. It is noted that a person with high self-efficacy will set more ambitious goals and plan his or her actions accordingly, which will likely help the salesperson achieve success. This may mean that salespeople with high self-efficacy are willing to ask questions, providing he or she clearly understands the buyers' situation, problem or doubt. Research also shows that people with high self-efficacy are better at adapting their behaviour to new situations to reach set goals, and adaptive selling behaviour can be a predictor of better sales performance (McMurrian *et al.* 2002, Spiro & Weitz 1990, Weitz *et al.* 1986).

Research shows that adaptability in selling is linked to high levels of self-efficacy. Salespeople with high self-efficacy levels take different approaches in sales meetings, and second, they have the ability to change their approach during the interaction with the buyer if needed. Selling has changed due to the increasing complexity of business environments, which means flexibility and the readiness to change planned behaviour is essential in B2B interactions, and may help to address buyers' doubts and risks. Salespeople with high self-efficacy engage more often with task-related activities, and do not give up easily. Bandura (1982, 1986) sees this relationship between self-efficacy and a greater coping effort as an adaptation towards buyers' needs. It may also be seen that perceived self-efficacy is a belief in aiming for a set goal. Today's complex business environments put a salesperson in a situation where he or she must complete sales successfully without complete knowledge of the business situation. Salespeople require the ability to work in different situations and behave in a confident manner, and must be able to change their sales approaches and alter their planned actions during buyer-seller interactions. They also need to be flexible to adapt their behaviour and feel confident while making adjustments (Blocker *et al.* 2012, Rapp *et al.* 2010, Weitz *et al.* 1986).

Traditionally, sales literature has emphasised the importance of surveying the buyers' needs and wants, and of presenting and clarifying the business benefits the buyers receive when buying the products or services being sold. In fact, those issues are essential in a successful sales process, and are the core elements in value creation between business buyers and salespeople, but they should occur through an interaction where both parties develop a common understanding and relationship (Alamäki & Kaski 2015, Walter *et al.* 2001). It is important to note that the benefits salespeople present to the buyers in sales meetings are still value proposals, not the final business benefits. Therefore, the presented value proposals – although both parties have a common understanding of them – involve a stage of uncertainty before they can be adopted and implemented. There are always personal or organisation-related doubts and risks that delay the closing of sales deals, despite the clear benefits of the product or service that the sellers are offering to the buyers (Cheverton & van der Velde 2010). The proposed value is clear to the buyers through the using, consumption or implementation processes, and often before this, but the business buyer needs to commit his or her organisation to the new issues, or within the internal sales process must gain general acceptance from all those with direct or indirect power in the purchasing decision. Therefore, the buying process also affects business buyers on a personal level (Blocker *et al.* 2012, Cheverton & van der Velde 2010, Pink 2012, Tracy 2014), and can influence their career and position within their organisation. The saying "sales is human" is true, even in terms of

technological issues, as people are evaluated either informally or formally based on their decisions and the results achieved in their working environments.

3 Research approach and method

This paper aims to reveal empirically the nature of the risks and doubts in buyer-seller encounters, which involves researching how business buyers think in these encounters. The research goal is to analyse transcribed interviews with business buyers to determine how they define these risks and doubts.

The study presented in this paper makes an empirical contribution to sales and marketing research using twenty-one interviews with business buyers who are executives, managers or experts responsible for purchasing products and services in their unit or organisation. They represent several segments, such as logistics, construction, education and services. On average, the face-to-face interviews took between an hour and ninety minutes. The transcribed material was analysed using a qualitative content analysis method by coding the interview material twice. In the first coding round, the transcribed material was coded to sixteen subject classes or topics, and the two most relevant subject classes were selected for deeper analyses. In the second coding round, those two subject classes were recoded to provide more detail in several new doubts-and-risks-related subject classes. The transcribed interviews were analysed independently by two researchers.

4 Findings

4.1 The buyers think salespeople intentionally or unintentionally underestimate doubts and risks in the buying process

This study shows that the identifying, minimising or removing of risks is not a self-evident procedure adopted by all salespeople in buyer-seller encounters. The business buyers believe that some of salespeople underestimate the risks to ensure closing the sales deal, and that salespeople intentionally focus on benefits and closing the sales deal by ignoring the buyers' feelings or potential questions concerning the risks. The following quote demonstrates how the business buyers think salespeople intentionally disregard discourse concerning possible doubts or risks:

"I suppose that salespeople understate or underestimate risks to some extent. Their goal is to sell products, and the customers do not like to buy them if they notice that they include risks."

The business buyers expect the salespeople to be able to recognise the potential risks, and to observe the behaviour of the business buyers or their business processes or usage environment to identify weak points that may cause potential risks. This competence requirement relates to domain expertise, which helps salespeople understand the buyers' business processes and special requirements of the buyers' organisation. For example, one buyer stated:

"...salespeople should know the operations, practices and background of customers, to some extent, [so] that they are able to observe just these types of problems and risks... ..and salespeople are too careful to bring out risks as it might impact on the sales results."

The buyers also expect the salesperson to be ethical, as they do not like sales processes where the salespeople try to sell products that customers clearly do not need or cannot utilise in their organisation. For example, one buyer brought up sales ethics by stating:

“The risk is an issue that I would like to emphasise more. I hope that salespeople also have [a] big belief in products that they [sell]... So it is, the sales ethics is such [a] thing, that salespeople should sell to those customers who really have a need for that product. And I hope that they would sell the product to those customers who can utilise it, as otherwise it does not generate development to any system.”

The findings show that the buyers evidently would like to build better relationships with those salespeople who understand that the implementation and use of new products and services includes uncertainty. In other words, the implementation and use of new products and services involves potential risks that might prevent the realisation of benefits within the planned schedule and budget. Therefore, the buying process includes risks for the buyers' business processes and systems, but also personally for the buyers' career and position in the organisation.

4.2 Experienced salespeople recognise and manage buying risks

The interviews show that the buyers believe experienced salespeople can better recognise and manage risks. According to the business buyers, experienced salespeople have the ability to foresee how things might develop in the buyers' organisation, and to identify the factors that might affect the implementation and practical processes while new products and services are rolled out. They are also capable of “reading the thoughts” of the business buyers, as they have learned through practical experience how the buyers construct the potential business benefits in their mind in relation to the current state of their organisation and business ecosystem. As an example, one buyer noted a clear difference between experienced and inexperienced salespeople in terms of their ability to recognise risks, an observation also provided by many other interviewees:

“I think that especially the experienced salespeople, who have worked [for a] long time on that product and have seen a lot, can recognise the risks.”

The buyers also think that the ability to recognise risks is a feature of professional salespeople. As stated earlier, the buyers suppose that some of salespeople intentionally disregard the discussing of doubts and risks. However, the buyers also believe that not all salespeople actually have the ability and skills to deal with doubts and risks, and instead think they sell features and benefits without knowing how those benefits are realised in the buyers' organisation or what human, financial and error-sensitive technical issues affect the implementation and consumption of new products and services. For example, one buyer put it this way:

“Some [recognise risks] better [than] others. I would say that the best salespeople can pretty well pay attention to this and go through all things and worries very precisely. They can also pay attention to the stumbling blocks and the feelings of people, if we will begin to cooperate. The others are such that they cannot pay attention to these issues at all...”

The findings indicate that the business buyers have experience of two types of salespeople. The first group can recognise and manage the doubts and risks buyers encounter during the buyer-seller interactions; they do not underestimate or ignore them, but rather make them topics of sales discourse. The second group of salespeople do not deal with the buyers' emotions or visible or invisible risks, but instead focus purely on formal sales topics such as the business needs, benefits, pricing or other positive issues.

4.3 The buyers say questioning techniques are a means of managing doubts and risks during the buying process

The buyers expect that those salespeople who can listen to customers and ask the right questions will have a better understanding of the critical issues from the viewpoint of customers. They should also have the right attitude, and should be active in the sales interaction, as one role of salespeople in this interaction is to manage discussion and pay attention to customers' questions. They should also have the ability to "read between the lines"; in other words, to recognise customers' doubts, risks and worries – their signs of weakness. Often, the buyers cannot clearly express their doubts and worries, but they express them indirectly. Therefore, questions are important tools to help the buyers conceptualise and define the doubts and risks.

Making doubts and risks visible is a precondition for minimising and removing them, as the salespeople can only focus on the doubts and risks that the buyers can consciously describe. In the interviews, the buyers emphasised the role of questions in good sales encounters where both benefits and risks are discussed openly:

"In general, the salespeople who can ask [the] right questions can understand customers better and they find out what kinds of issues are problems and cause uncertainty for the sales process. The asking of questions is the only way to find out those things."

The buyers also believe that the right questions are a means of opening discourse on doubts and risks, and their management is evidently an essential factor in sales success. Furthermore, the study indicates that the buyers think the salespeople differ from each other in terms of their ability to ask practical questions and focus clearly on the challenges in the buyer's organisation. For example, one buyer stated:

"It depends on the interest [of salespeople], that he really asks questions and deeply understands the issues [and] what he is selling, especially on the practical level. That way, they quickly get in touch [with the] challenges. This also differentiates the salespeople from each other, and if he has practical experience and he really knows what he is talking about, this comes out quickly."

The findings demonstrate that the business buyers expect professional salespeople to have the ability to ask the right questions concerning doubts and risks. This encapsulates the ability to learn through asking questions about the challenges that buyers encounter in their business processes and the means of formulating practical value proposals in the value co-creation encounters. The understanding of buyers' business challenges is needed in formulating questions to uncover both emotional and rational feelings about risks. Hence, the professional salesperson concerns him or herself with business benefits and the doubts and risks that might end or slow down the buying process, and he or she tries to minimise and remove those obstacles from the sales process while working with the buyers.

5 Discussion

Doubts and risks are an essential influence on the behaviour of business buyers, who appreciate the salesperson focusing on those issues in the buyer-seller encounter. The discourse concerning doubts and risks evidently has a positive effect on the business buyers, and it builds trust between the business buyers and the salesperson. Therefore, given that it promotes trust, it should be seen as an essential element of relationship building. The doubts and risks are emotional reactions to the situation where the buyers feel consciously or unconsciously unsure. For example, they cannot recognise or identify all of the issues that

influence the successful implementation or using processes of new products and services, or they are not satisfied with the expertise or behaviour of the salesperson. Hence, doubts are the buyers' personal feelings related to the salesperson, sales firm or service provider, rather than rational issues connected to the quality, value proposal or implementation capability of the service providers.

Buyers for businesses and public organisations purchase products and services to solve business problems and meet needs ranging from minor product improvements to large outsourcing services. The business problems and needs are usually solved by replacing, renewing or implementing new products and services, and this involves taking potential risks to achieve calculated business benefits within a scheduled budget and timescale. When the problem or need is satisfied, the organisation gains benefits, which are typically monetary values such as savings, increased revenue or more profitable business operations. This operational improvement or strategic advantage is only realised if the salespeople and the buyer's organisation are able to fulfil the promise of value; in other words, if there are no obstacles, mistakes, errors or unexpected human factors that affect the realisation of value. Therefore, the B2B selling and buying is not purely the selling of benefits and value, but also involves minimising the identified and unidentified doubts, risks and worries. The buyers are buying safety rather than risks.

The study shows that doubts and risks are an integral part of the business buyers buying process. The buyers feel and recognise them in several phases of the sales process, but they especially try to identify them during the buying process. The doubts and risks are related to the salespeople themselves, the sales organisation and the implementation capability of the buying organisation. They can also be related to the buyer's organisation and its people, processes and culture.

In addition, this study shows that business buyers think some salespeople notice risks but ignore them in trying to close the sales deal. Those salespeople overlook or underestimate the buyers' doubts despite the fact their behaviour might prevent the buying process from proceeding. The buyers also feel that salespeople do not like to focus on the doubts and risks that they directly or indirectly raise during the sales interaction as, according to the buyers, such issues might stop them from making purchasing decisions. It seems that there is a potential conflict between the stated behaviour of salespeople and the expectation of buyers. The buyers suppose that the salespeople observe and recognise the doubts or risks that they themselves have also recognised, but the salespeople are silent on these issues during sales interactions to maximise their own short-term benefits.

Careful listening, the observation of customer behaviour and building a common understanding are features of professional salespeople and characteristics of successful sales interactions. This study points out that the more experienced salespeople possess these skills, which the interviewed buyers have noticed in their practical encounters with salespeople. It may be that the inexperienced salespeople are too eager to proceed in the sales process, and they worry about raising negative issues in the sales discourse as they do not have the expertise required to manage them in practice. The experienced salespeople may also be those with the highest self-efficacy, those who focus their actions on the buyer. High self-efficacy may also help salespeople to be more willing to understand buyers' situations properly by asking more questions. This coping mechanism may allow salespeople to understand buyers' doubts and risks and help facilitate the buying process.

The business buyers also stated that asking relevant questions helps to define and overcome doubts and risks. Thus, the capability to speak about doubts and risks is a competence needed in effective value co-creation and problem solving, meaning it is a critical skill for professional salespeople. The open dialogue regarding doubts and risks increases trust and relationship building. Unlike innovation (e.g. Kaski *et al.* 2014, Mäki & Alamäki 2014, Vargo & Lusch 2004,

2008) or user-centred design processes (e.g. Alamäki & Dirin 2014) – which are also value co-creation processes – the sales process concerns trust and relationship-related issues, and open dialogue increases trust. For instance, several sales studies (Rapp 2014) have emphasised the importance of rapport and relationship building between the buyers and salesperson. This study shows that avoiding or underestimating the buyers' doubts and risks is likely to produce a lack of confidence between the buyers and salespeople, and result in a failure to build the trust relationship needed in successful B2B sales encounters.

6 Conclusions and future work

This study demonstrates that buyers believe some salespeople intentionally underestimate doubts or risks that occur during the sales process in an attempt to secure the final sale. On the other hand, the buyers think that experienced salespeople are better able to recognise and manage their feelings concerning doubts and risks than their inexperienced counterparts. In addition, they feel that salespeople who ask relevant questions better understand their doubts, risks and worries related to the decision-making and purchasing process. Therefore, our findings suggest that removing feelings related to doubts and risks in the buyer's buying process is an essential part of successful B2B buyer-seller encounters.

A better understanding of what types of doubts or risks occur in the buying process, and how buyers indirectly or directly express them, will help the salesperson and sales organisations to develop their sales skills, processes and strategies. The saying "sales is human" is true, even in highly technological settings, as the buyers are often economically, socially or personally responsible for purchasing decisions as they affect many people and processes in her or his organisation during the implementation, using or consumption phases.

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