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Digital transformation and value-based selling activities: seller and buyer perspectives

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Digital
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Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to examine the digital transformation of business-to-business (B2B) sales and its effects on the management of value-based selling.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopted a qualitative interview research design. A total of two participant groups—one consisting of sales management professionals and the other consisting of buyers—were created to conduct abductive data analysis to gain a new understanding of B2B sales management.

Findings – As a result of the digital transformation of sales, companies are shifting B2B sales towards value-based selling using a more proactive, continuous process wherein digital value co-creation activities play a big role. Similarly, their buyers now expect more proactive communication about new value propositions, but social media channels are of little importance to most B2B buyers. The management of digital value co-creation activities should be addressed from the sales ecosystem perspective, where non-sellers tend to have a strong role in communicating new value propositions.

Research limitations/implications – There needs to be further research on digital value co-creation activities in the sales ecosystem, as value-based selling requires that selling organizations focus more on educational digital content marketing and engagement with non-sellers via both marketing and sales activities.

Practical implications – Companies rarely exploit experts and project personnel when implementing digital sales strategies; however, they often meet with customers personally and network with them. This requires a broader perspective on sales management.

Originality/value – This is one of the first studies to explore the management of value-based selling from both seller and buyer perspectives.

Keywords Digital transformation, Sales management, Value-based selling, Buyer–supplier relationship, Sales ecosystem

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The digitalization of marketing and sales practices is transforming sales management (Guenzi and Habel, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2019; Syam and Sharma, 2018). Simultaneously, digital relationships between sellers and buyers are becoming increasingly critical for sales and marketing practices (Rapp *et al.*, 2014; Rust and Huang, 2014). Therefore, as interactive applications of information technology, social media marketing and digital content marketing have recently received scholarly attention in the business-to-business (B2B) context (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Guesalaga, 2016; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). In addition, the

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adoption of artificial intelligence for sales is believed to further digitally transform sales practices in the near future (Paschen *et al.*, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2019; Syam and Sharma, 2018).

Digital transformation is not only providing new means and tools for managing sales but is also systematically changing B2B sales management and ecosystems. For example, the value-based selling perspective has spread across the field (Cuevas, 2018; Terho *et al.*, 2012; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015), as the interaction between sellers and buyers has radically changed because of the digital transformation of sales and marketing. The digitalization of marketing and sales has blurred the boundaries between industrial marketing and sales processes that enhance synergic benefits and promote the performance of companies (Vaid *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the sharing of educational content via social networks has become a new method of informing customers about new value propositions (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016).

This study contributes to emerging research on the digital transformation of B2B sales (Guenzi and Habel, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2020). It focuses on the digital transformation and value co-creation activities of sales management. Thus, seller and buyer perspectives of this phenomenon have been reviewed to gain a holistic understanding of emerging sales and purchase practices affected by digital transformation.

To date, research on sales has emphasized the importance of proactive customer orientation in co-creating value in sales management (Cuevas, 2018; Kaski *et al.*, 2019; Paesbrughe *et al.*, 2017), but previous researchers rarely investigated this orientation from the viewpoint of digital transformation (Guenzi and Habel, 2020). The latest research on sales management (Hartmann *et al.*, 2018) suggests that B2B sales are best addressed from an ecosystem perspective, as several actors participate in industrial marketing and sales processes at various digital and non-digital touch points. Thus, in this study, an ecosystem perspective was adopted to understand the digital transformation of value-based selling practices as part of sales management.

To increase our understanding of the digital transformation of B2B sales, the business managers of sales companies and their prospective or current customers were interviewed. The research question was as follows: What opportunities and challenges do sales managers perceive in managing the digital transformation of value-based selling, and what types of new digital value drivers do buyers expect or prefer during their purchase process?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: In the following section, a review of the relevant literature is provided. Subsequently, the methodology and data used in the study are described. Then, findings from selling and buying organizations are outlined. In the final section, the contributions, theoretical and managerial implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

Literature review

Digital transformation of B2B sales

Several factors are responsible for the shift in the sales and marketing communication environment. First, in this digital age, customers are more information-empowered than they were in the past, as they can now gather information especially during the early stages of the buying process (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015). According to some practical studies, B2B buyers make about 60% of their purchase decision before contacting the seller (Adamson *et al.*, 2012; CEB, 2012). Second, because of market fragmentation, companies are moving away from mass marketing (Verhoef *et al.*, 2015), while some even ignore traditional media entirely. Third, developments in digital technology have changed the ways in which customers and sellers communicate (Rust and Huang, 2014). According to forecasts by the pragmatic research and consulting group Gartner (2020), up to 80% of B2B sales interactions between buyers and

sellers will be carried out through digital channels by the year 2025. However, many sales companies are struggling to transform themselves digitally although they have identified its importance (Guenzi and Habel, 2020).

The use of social media tools improves the satisfaction of and interaction and relationships with customers, as these tools facilitate communication between salespeople and customers (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Simula *et al.*, 2015). Thus, B2B companies have increasingly invested in social media marketing in order to engage customers via social networks (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Siamagka *et al.*, 2015), with the primary aim being to monitor the online behaviour of customers as well as enhance communication with them. In fact, customers use several channels and media in pre- and post-purchase processes (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2013), but little is known about the social interaction that occurs between customers, project managers and experts in terms of value facilitation and co-creation.

Changes in the marketing communication environment are altering the overall role of marketing communications. Kotler *et al.* (2017, p. 411) stated that content marketing individuals “create, inspire and share brand messages and conversations with and among customers across a fluid mix of paid, owned, earned and shared communication channels”. Furthermore, the present study relied on Holliman and Rowley’s (2014) definition of B2B content marketing, which focuses on sharing the valuable content to engage and encourage customers in the buying consideration process. Content marketing, blogs, social media marketing and podcasts are inbound marketing techniques (Bleoju *et al.*, 2016) that aim to create demand among prospective customers.

From product sales to value-based selling practices

Value-based selling has received increased attention in the literature on B2B marketing and sales (Paesbrugge *et al.*, 2017; Terho *et al.*, 2012; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015). This is a sales approach wherein suppliers and customers interact to identify new business development opportunities and latent needs and craft customer-specific value propositions. Marketing and sales focus on communicating and creating value propositions, not actual value co-creation, which takes place primarily after the B2B sales process (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Skålen *et al.*, 2015).

Most of the research on inter-organizational relational exchange has addressed the role of a seller in relationship marketing, whereas empirical research on relationship value from a customer perspective is scarce (Gligor *et al.*, 2020; Gremler *et al.*, 2020; Ulaga, 2003; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). Customers evaluate relationship value according to its benefits and sacrifices in regard to the buyer–seller relationship (Pullins *et al.*, 2017; Ritter and Walter, 2012; Ulaga and Eggert, 2005). Thus, the role of non-sellers and other actors has become more important (Hartmann *et al.*, 2018; Tobiassen and Pettersen, 2018). The initiatives of B2B sales not only involve the tasks of salespeople and marketers but also include value creation for customers by project managers, coordinators, consultants and other experts (cf. Vargo and Lusch, 2016), continually meeting customers in person and, by doing so, managing customers’ everyday challenges and development projects. Furthermore, during these customer encounters, they can recognize new business development or improvement opportunities that would provide new sales prospects for suppliers.

The literature on service-dominant logic—more specifically, resource integration (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Lusch *et al.*, 2016)—recognizes substance experts and project personnel as actors who participate in the actual value creation process with customers. Hence, they undertake practices wherein value is facilitated and created, playing a pivotal role in the value creation process in the industrial context. Although inter-organizational

value creation has been widely accepted, little is known about how suppliers can facilitate customer learning in the complex B2B sales and marketing setting.

Value creation in the B2B sales process is a relational activity executed by boundary-spanning people (Walter, 1999), while the target being the co-creation of a value proposition. As Table 1 summarizes, value creation consists of customer learning, interactional activities, content sharing, value creation and customer relationship management. There appears to be little research on how non-sellers engage in the co-creation of a value proposition in the digital age.

Value creation activities in digital marketing and sales

The facilitation of purchase processes for business customers should involve continuous interaction throughout the customer journey using different digital touch points (Hallikainen *et al.*, 2019). Digital marketing and sales activities trigger potential customers to move forward within the customer journey. It triggers, for example, non-prospective customers into becoming prospective customers (Alamäki *et al.*, 2019). From the customer perspective, the key issue of digital marketing and content exchange is the valuable marketing content itself (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008). Anderson and Narus (1990) highlighted the effectiveness of information exchange rather than the quantity of information exchanged. Customers evaluate the quality of information according to the credibility, predictive relevance and veracity of the content (Fink-Shamit and Bar-Ilan, 2008). Some of the most widespread forms of digital content are white papers, webinars, videos, blogs, e-books, infographics and social media posts (Chaffey and Smith, 2013). In addition, previous studies (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016) have shown that content marketing and social media marketing are interrelated, as they have comparable business objectives.

Recognized value creation phases	Value creation activities	Literature
Creating and triggering a new understanding and demand in customer companies and networks	Developing and maintaining relationships with several decision-makers and analysing customer behaviour using customer data	Charterina <i>et al.</i> (2017), Järvinen and Karjaluoto (2015), Kaski <i>et al.</i> (2018), Mehl and Hansen (2017) and Wiersema (2013)
Facilitating customer learning by providing new knowledge and demonstrations to communicate value propositions	Enhancing digital content and social media marketing, marketing automation and consulting and trial and pilot projects with customers	Holliman and Rowley (2014), Järvinen and Taiminen (2016), Koiso-Kanttila (2004) and Rust and Huang (2014)
Co-creating and contextualizing value propositions within customer processes during sales interactions	Developing an understanding of the business models, processes and latent customer needs, as customers evaluate relationship value according to the benefits and costs	Blocker <i>et al.</i> (2011), Eggert <i>et al.</i> (2006), Ritter and Walter (2012), Terho <i>et al.</i> (2012), Töytäri and Rajala (2015) and Ulaga and Eggert (2005)
Integrating resources in co-production to create value	Managing relations and resource integration, solving value conflicts and implementing solutions	Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012), Grönroos and Voima (2013) and Vargo and Lusch (2016)
Managing customer relationships and promoting new value propositions concerning new sales opportunities	Managing customer relationships, facilitating customer learning and triggering new development opportunities	Haas <i>et al.</i> (2012), Holliman and Rowley (2014), Terho <i>et al.</i> (2012) and Töytäri and Rajala (2015)

Table 1.
Summary of literature on value creation activities in the digital era

Research suggests the importance of focussing content on understanding customer needs and solving their problems in digital content marketing (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). Thus, marketers should adopt the mindset of a publisher and create valuable content, which requires an understanding of the information needs of customers (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). If experts, marketers, salespeople and project personnel develop, find and share high-quality content on the basis of customer needs, they can facilitate the value propositions of a company.

Creating, sharing and recommending useful content to target customers motivates them to engage with company websites and online stores (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). Thus, content marketing can improve the ability of salespeople to identify prospective customers, as the Internet acts as a large information source for B2B buyers during their buying processes (Wiersema, 2013). However, the digital marketing literature on sales and sales management is currently scarce (Pomirleanu *et al.*, 2013; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2014).

From dyadic interaction to an ecosystem approach

Recently, business markets have been studied from a network perspective. Möller and Halinen (1999) have suggested that networks are replacing ordinary customer–supplier relationships. A network does not mean individual and isolated transactions, but it is formed from complex interactions within and between companies (Ford *et al.*, 2003, p. 18). The next shift is anticipated to replace the concept of networks with ecosystems on the basis of increased connectivity, interdependence and co-evolution of actors and technologies that affect relationships and networks (Aarikka-Stenroos and Ritala, 2017; Hartmann *et al.*, 2018). However, there is currently no commonly accepted understanding of the overall added value of the ecosystem approach.

In a seminal article, Moore (1993) first used the concept of “business ecosystem” as an analogy from ecology to describe the interdependence and co-evolution characterizing modern business activities. Later, the definition and key elements of the business ecosystem were elaborated by several researchers in their papers describing corporate environments through interrelated or nested layers (Lappi, 2017; Möller *et al.*, 2020). The manageability of each ecosystem is not clear (Aarikka-Stenroos and Ritala, 2017) although prior research (e.g. Lappi, 2017) has shown that management practices characterized by hierarchy and control are not considered workable.

Korpela (2019) suggested that a sales ecosystem model consists of the definition of its scope, the role of actors in the different stages of relationships, the value of relationships within it and orchestrating of sales ecosystem activities. An efficiently and effectively managed sales ecosystem enables a better customer experience, stronger loyalty and increased value for customers. Managing a sales ecosystem requires management and leadership competencies and practices, such as target setting, trust building between actors, transparency and open communication. In the complex B2B context, the role of salespersons remains central although buyers tend to interact with several actors and hierarchical levels in the selling organization.

For the purpose of this study, the sales ecosystem is defined as a perspective on value-based selling in the digital transformation era. The key actors comprise companies and individuals who carry out sales work regardless of their hierarchical or functional positions.

Management of value-based selling activities in the sales ecosystem

The key concepts of this study are summarized in Figure 1. Recent studies have shown that digital transformation is changing sales management practices (Guenzi and Habel, 2020; Rust and Huang, 2014). As B2B customers are now more self-learned than they were previously



Figure 1.
A conceptual model of sales management in the digital era

(Guesalaga, 2016; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016; Kumar *et al.*, 2020), B2B sales have shifted towards value-based selling (Terho *et al.*, 2012; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015). In value-based selling, both sellers and customers aim to co-create new value propositions by identifying latent business development opportunities that they could solve by integrating resources (cf. Skålen *et al.*, 2015).

In response to changes in customer behaviour because of digital transformation, selling organizations need to adapt their sales activities to meet the new expectations of customers. Hartmann *et al.* (2018) have stated that B2B sales management should be addressed from an ecosystem perspective, as several actors besides salespeople participate in value co-creation activities during sales processes. Value-based selling activities—such as interactions between project personnel, specialists and buyers—and digital content shared through various channels aim to influence customer expectations and understand them by sharing new knowledge about new value propositions. Hence, it tries to change the mindset of prospective customers and create new demand for the services of sellers (Kaski *et al.*, 2019).

Methodology

To answer the research question, data were collected from informants within both selling and buying organizations. The literature on sales has often neglected data collection from current or potential buyers although sales interactions and transactions are not possible without buyers (Plouffe *et al.*, 2008). Plouffe *et al.* (2008) showed that only 12.9% of the research on sales has empirically examined buyers' expectations, experiences or other factors. Thus, to understand the digital transformation of B2B sales, seller and buyer perspectives should be examined. The present study adopted a qualitative interview research design to conduct a thorough examination of under-researched phenomena and experiences (Gummesson, 2000). Data were collected from both sellers and buyers in two phases. The buyers consisted of prospective or current customers of selling organizations. The researchers contacted them for interviews immediately after they contacted the selling organizations or immediately after

decision-making. Thus, the buyers represent an authentic target group comprising potential or existing customers, contributing to the validity of this study. In addition, this research setting enhanced the understanding of research phenomena from both seller and buyer perspectives as they had either existing (established customers) or potential (prospective customers) business relationships. The data collection for this study was centred on the early phases of the sales process, where buyers had taken initial steps to contact the selling organizations. Interviews with the sellers helped in assessing their expectations regarding the digitalization and improvement of sales management, whereas interviews with the buyers focused on their experiences and expectations concerning digital means in buying processes.

Dataset 1: interviews with business managers within the selling organizations

To define the business needs of service companies concerning the digitalization of sales activities, interviews were conducted with 17 representatives of five service companies (Table 2) in the fields of information and communications technology (ICT), health care, interior services and security services, all of which operate in the B2B sector. The selection of five case companies for business management interviews followed criteria that aim to ensure rich samples of real-life phenomena (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Furthermore, they were large service companies that were in the process of digitalizing their sales and marketing processes; thus, they had an experience of—and insights into—the development process. Last, they operated within the B2B service segment and had practiced value-based sales and marketing to some extent.

The goal of the interviews was to determine what kinds of opportunities or challenges the companies were facing in terms of the transformation process caused by advancements in technological sales and marketing applications and systems. The methodological approach consisted of focus group interviews held at all five companies. The interviews focused on the following themes: current state and development needs of sales and marketing, visions for the future and expectations for development initiatives. The average duration of the interviews was 1 h and 42 min. In addition, the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in order to enable a qualitative content analysis.

Selling organization	Industry	Employees	Focus group interview
Company A	Interior services	500–1,000	IT manager Marketing director Executive Sales director
Company B	Information and communications technology	500–1,000	Chief marketing officer Sales director
Company C	Health care	5,000–7,500	Sales director Chief technology officer Development manager Brand manager Marketing manager Communication director
Company D	Information and communications technology	2,500–5,000	Customer director User experience manager Social media expert
Company E	Security services	1,000–2,500	Marketing manager Marketing manager

Table 2.
Informants in the selling organizations

Dataset 2: interviews with buyers within the buying organizations

Overall, 17 buyers were involved in the second data collection phase (Table 3). The buyers represented customers who had relationships with the selling organizations (see Table 2) and the intent to buy services or were interested in the services of the selling organizations. They were contacted immediately after they indicated their interest in the services of the selling organizations or after they made purchase decisions. If the buyer accepted the interview request, the interview was scheduled. The average duration of the interviews was approximately 45 min. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for qualitative analysis. The average age of the interviewees was 45 years.

Data analysis

An abductive qualitative research approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) was applied, as it enables researchers to establish explanations of the conceptual model while analysing data in an iterative manner. In abductive research, researchers simultaneously process the previous literature and analyse empirical data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The adoption of this iterative research process in this study allowed for the development of a deeper

S. No	Title	Gender	Work experience (years)	Business role	Industry
1	Production manager	M	5–9	Decision-maker	Metal processing (SME*)
2	Purchase manager	M	–	Decision-maker	Industries' environmental services (large)
3	Consultant	M	>10	Expert	Construction services (large)
4	HR and finance director	M	>10	Decision-maker	Investment (not defined)
5	Property manager	M	>10	Decision-maker	Construction services (large)
6	Property manager	M	>10	Decision-maker	Property administration (SME)
7	Purchase manager	M	5–9	Decision-maker	Real estate management (SME)
8	Development manager	M	>10	Decision-maker	Electronic industry (large)
9	Property manager	M	>10	Decision-maker	Construction services (large)
10	Quality and risk expert	M	5–9	Expert	Training services (SME)
11	Purchase manager	M	>10	Decision-maker	Recycling services (SME)
12	Supply manager	M	<5	Decision-maker	Machine and device manufacturing (large)
13	HR coordinator	F	<5	Decision-maker	Retailing (large)
14	Maintenance manager	M	>10	Decision-maker	Ship and boat manufacturing (large)
15	Production director	M	>10	Decision-maker	Printing services (SME)
16	Finance director	M	>10	Decision-maker	Restaurant services (SME)
17	Rector	F	>10	Decision-maker	Education (non-profit organization)

Table 3. Informants within the buying organizations

Note(s): SME, small and medium-sized enterprises

understanding of the analysed empirical data while simultaneously contributing to the theoretical understanding of relationship marketing and selling and content sharing (Gummesson, 2000).

Data analysis began with analysing sales development needs among business managers within the selling organizations, followed by an analysis of the buyer interviews. In the interview analysis of the informants within the selling organizations, open coding was applied without pre-defined coding categories for the literature review and facilitated an understanding of value creation in an inter-organizational setting (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The coding of interview transcripts involved marking all comments, mentioning or explaining the changing needs of professional sales and how personnel (other than salespeople) could provide value for customers. The results showed that the companies represented in this study reported several similar needs and development goals, which allowed for constructing a common understanding.

The theoretical understanding of the empirical observations and findings was constantly revised (Gummesson, 2000). In analysing the data from the first data collection phase, the focus was on comments indicating development needs in value-based selling and the role of other personnel in creating an initial understanding of new business development opportunities. In the second data collection phase with the buyers, learning and information needs were reviewed and classified according to the coding of themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Several methods were used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings, as a qualitative analysis could present weaknesses in data interpretation (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The findings were reflected within the framework of the interrelationship between the empirical data and the prior research. Furthermore, using the two data collection phases from the viewpoints of the selling and buying organizations increased the trustworthiness of the data.

Findings

Findings from interviews with business managers within the selling organizations

Customers expect more proactive co-creation of value propositions. The findings show that service companies have started to adopt value-based selling that requires a more proactive behaviour of salespeople and marketers. The managers within selling organizations aim to increase their focus on recognizing latent needs and business development opportunities and generating new propositions and value promises. Data also reveal that the development of inter-organizational communication is essential, and customers expect more proactive value co-creation from inter-organizational interactions. The sales director of Service Company C expressed that the company should provide value to the customer in the first customer encounter: “Also, one of our most evident development targets is how to increase value-based selling . . . also, our customers are increasingly asking for value”. However, the transformation of sales practices into proactive selling is just the beginning of new sales practices. Instead of proactively seeking new development opportunities and helping customers to learn about new possibilities, most salespeople and project managers are used for presenting product and service features, making arguments about the benefits of the product. The sales director of Service Company A said the following: “It has changed so—if I may exaggerate a bit—that we have shifted from a reactively acting customer service-oriented product selling into proactive [selling]. The ideal situation is that we act proactively—consultatively, so to say, value-based selling”.

For value-based selling, a broader perspective of customer needs should be adopted instead of only reacting to their visible development needs or tenders. For instance, experts and project managers—who are constantly meeting customers—should participate in a proactive consultative discourse that generates customer interest in

new possibilities and highlights development possibilities or new technological opportunities. The chief marketing officer (CMO) of Service Company B stressed that sales initiatives should cover a larger component of customer interactions: “We have to offer value to the customer in the chain as a whole, to figure out the pains of the customer today and to offer the right things at that moment in time to form a longer customer relationship”.

Co-creation of new value propositions should be an ongoing process involving all actors. The transformation of sales influences how companies communicate with customers. Furthermore, proactive value-based selling requires communication skills. For instance, the customer director of Service Company D stated the following: “Between the business management and our IT guys, many of them are very good experts, but they cannot communicate in the same way with the [customers’] business managers that the requirement is nowadays”. The digitalization of business and customer processes is transforming interactions with customer expectations, which reflects how companies are interacting with customers, stakeholders and all representatives of customer projects. The customer director of Service Company D continued as follows: “And then the other phenomenon that is taking place because of this digitalization is this: a customer encounters mass that is becoming continuous, which means that there is no single sales event, where we sell a big And those sales are taking place constantly during the entire customer relationship”.

The deepening of customer interactions and value co-creation requires all actors to add value. According to the literature on service management, actors cannot deliver value, but they can participate in creating and offering value propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Sales and marketing initiatives involve activities aimed at formulating a solution vision and value propositions, with the final value realized during the value creation process of the customer (Grönroos, 2009; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015). For example, the following statement made by the CMO of Service Company B indicates that sales and marketing activities should focus on all stakeholders in potential customer cases, with significant emphasis on the role of project managers: “In the customer interface, there are very many actors, because this business is such that projects are done and the project personnel also works with the customers, and they typically also can sell additional projects”. Thus, professionals who do not specialize in sales and marketing but instead perform this role part time should have supporting practices and tools at their disposal. This is especially critical where there are shifts in sales and marketing from product and service features towards value-based selling, wherein the sellers are focussing on process improvements rather than providing a single solution. The interviews also revealed that mobility is a key development trend, as customers are increasingly accessing the digital services provided by companies using mobile devices.

The sales ecosystem perspective is becoming more essential. The analysis of the interviews shows that the ecosystem perspective is becoming increasingly important to B2B sales management. B2B sales are no longer merely a dyadic interaction between salespeople and customers; specialists, partners and other actors also participate in the sales process, and their role appears to be increasing. The sales director of Service Company C put it this way: “Sales, as process and demand, will change, so that we really should have specialists who are able to consult”. This comment shows that B2B sales are becoming more demanding, especially when sellers aim to co-create new business needs and development opportunities. In addition, the role of salespeople seems to have shifted towards the management of the sales network, where specialists, partners and other actors each have their own special roles. For example, the marketing manager of Service Company E provided an example of why their partners are also selling their services, as the partners expect to save on compensation costs in the long term. The findings indicate that the digital transformation of B2B sales is making sales management even more complicated and polarized, and more actors are contributing to

sales processes. Simultaneously, competence needs have increased as part of sales management because buyers are more self-educated before they meet salespeople and demands for new development ideas and value propositions have grown among customers. These findings emphasize the importance of the ecosystem perspective in managing the digital transformation of B2B sales.

Findings from the interviews with business buyers

Buyers' needs, value drivers and proposed solutions. The analysis of the interviews shows that business buyers require additional information from all phases of the customer journey (Table 4). Selling organizations can share educational and informational digital content with buyers those fulfil these learning needs. Furthermore, customer needs concern contact information and basic understanding of products and services, but they also pertain to increased knowledge of new value propositions and product and service ideas. In addition, they may also want to meet experts or salespeople in person through live chats or other online communication tools to receive new information.

The findings show that different content marketing practices respond to different customer needs. For example, the sharing of new ideas and customer testimonials assists customers in recognizing their latent needs and thus helps to create new demand at the customer base. Customers can evaluate and learn from the company-generated value propositions using online calculation or evaluation tools. These tools can help them to evaluate returns on investment and business benefits. An increased understanding of product and service information is a typical content marketing practice that is conducted, for example, through white papers, product descriptions, e-catalogues, videos, webinars or blogs. The sharing of basic information and enhancing of direct communication were also mentioned. These findings indicate that customers have different information needs in their customer journey. Table 4 presents how different content supports diverse learning and information needs. These needs vary depending on the phase of the customer purchase process and thus require various content marketing practices.

Buyers expect proactive and adaptive value propositions. The findings reveal that buyers expect sellers to proactively market and inform them about new service opportunities or offerings. For example, the production director of a printing service company stated that “it is unbelievable, how they have had some product like a half year or a year in their selection without that nobody has told anything to us. It is the activity of a salesperson has the big signification”. The production manager of a metal processing company stated that “this was the first contact within three years . . . , that I saw anybody there, when I made the phone call and asked. So the communication to customers could be more active”.

The buyers also experienced obstacles in content marketing. For example, privacy concerns were mentioned as an obstacle in sharing personal information while searching for and evaluating services on the online channels of the sellers. In addition, quality issues and effectiveness of face-to-face communication were also mentioned. The importance of content marketing may decrease when customers shift to having closer relationships with service providers. The real estate manager, for instance, said as follows “Home pages and presentation videos have maybe been made for smaller customers than us. When we want partnership and that way supplier has total responsibility, presentation videos do not create help and benefit to me”. This excerpt indicates that the level of relationship affects information-sharing needs and content marketing practices. The closer and larger the business partnership, the easier it is to achieve customer attention, as they expect more proactive attitudes and new ideas.

B2B buyers perceived social media channels as less important. Our results show that social media channels—such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter—are of little importance to most

Buyers' identified needs	Value drivers	Proposed solutions	Example citation
Creating new demand	Latent customer needs	Publication of new ideas, success stories and customer testimonials	"I am interested in the kind of story where someone was successful". (Purchasing manager) "Sharing up-to-date information and that kind of things interest me always. Not particularly the trivial knowledge but up-to-date business issues like new services and such things". (Consultant)
Demonstrating value proposition	Company-generated value proposition	Evaluation or modelling tool	"It is very difficult when the products have no price, as they are contract prices. I have no idea what you can get with 10,000 euros. I wish there was a modelling program, by which you could examine what you can get with a sum of x". (Director)
Ensuring realization of customer value	Customer perceived value	Planning tool	"I mean a planning software type solution. You click what you want from it, and you see directly how much it costs and whether it is available". (Supply manager)
Communicating market development	Market knowledge	Publication of market and trend analyses	"Communication of expertise contents, which is produced objectively and neutrally and which can be of benefit to the whole branch. I would be happy to read articles about current issues". (Property manager) "Interesting articles come there (in the net) plus you must always foresee where the business is going". (Purchasing manager)
Increasing understanding about new products or services	Product or service information	Videos, service descriptions and portfolios	"Enterprises have sent short video clips of the products that I am interested in. You can quickly check and see their strengths". (Quality expert) "Generic service descriptions, service portfolio and what you can get from them in general". (Property manager) "Video clips, it is much nicer to watch a ten seconds clip than to read a long blog". (Administrative and finance manager) "People go to the homepage in order to find out two things: how does the service work and in which area does it work?" (Purchasing manager)

Table 4.
The buyers' information needs, value drivers and supporting content marketing practices

(continued)

Buyers' identified needs	Value drivers	Proposed solutions	Example citation
Sharing basic information	Contact and pricing information	Contact and pricing information	<p>"Sometimes it is hard to find an e-mail address and also filling the form takes two or three times longer than sending an e-mail". (Head of department)</p> <p>"Contact information must be easily perceived". (Development manager)</p> <p>"These are the points, how can you contact people and the contact information". (Purchasing manager)</p>
Enhancing direct communication	Dyadic online communication	Interaction via face-to-face meetings or live chats	<p>"Live contact with people is surely the most important thing, especially in the purchases regarding technology. You must understand what people need; it is not just one or two line on the paper". (Supply manager)</p> <p>"The ease, if we talk about digitalization, a chat is an excellent means". (Purchasing manager)</p>

Table 4.

B2B buyers. These findings are surprising and contradict the claims of many commercial consulting companies that social media presence is imperative to stay competitive in the new era of B2B procurement. Our findings resonate with a UK study that found that half of B2B buyers made no use of social media (Buyersphere Report, 2015). The following comment from a production director illustrates the common opinion among the respondents: "At this moment, in this industry, I do not recognize the value of social media". It was also argued that social media is time consuming; one HR and finance director said that "social media is wasting time due to the flood of information". In addition, one purchase manager said that "I have not perceived any benefit of social media, and service providers continuously are inviting as a fellow and thus taking too much of my working time". From these interviews, it is clear that the relevance of content shared through social media must be carefully considered. For example, one property manager stated that "I would regard it as quite burdensome if I had to receive offers of air conditioners into my feeds". Social media was perceived as useful for networking purposes and following business trends. In addition, relevant articles were regarded as worthwhile. The following comment by a purchase manager illustrates this thinking: "Through social media you can follow, in which direction a business is developing". Finally, most buyers stated that the presence and behaviours of managers and salespeople on social media channels were not the reason for their negative purchasing decisions.

Synthesizing the findings: seller and buyer perspectives

With the sellers, we examined how value co-creation sales management activities are changing because of digitalization, and what kind of digital content and means their buyers expect. The findings show that sellers emphasize a value-based selling approach within the sales ecosystem, wherein various actors—along with salespeople—contribute to the latent or

undefined business needs of customers. The findings also show that buyers expect digital content and means that can assist them during their customer journey before an actual sales meeting. Although the buyers indicated a clear need for digital content and means, they had surprisingly low expectations about the availability of the sellers on social media.

The findings show that the digital transformation of B2B sales is causing a shift from product- and service-centric sales towards value-based activities, wherein non-sellers also participate in sales activities within the sales ecosystem. Buyers want to learn basic product and service information beforehand through digital content and means. Thus, the role of salespeople in face-to-face meetings has changed to being facilitators of value co-creation activities.

The findings reveal that sellers and buyers view the same phenomena from different perspectives; sellers review value-based selling practices on a more abstract level, whereas buyers expect concrete solutions for value drivers. In addition, specialists, partners and content marketers have a stronger role in the sales ecosystem than they had previously, as sales and marketing activities are blending. Sales and purchase initiatives are no longer linear processes; rather, they are iterative processes wherein buyers already have a more active role as value co-creators in the earlier phases of the sales process. More specifically, sellers now aim to proactively create a new demand for customers, while buyers expect sellers to proactively suggest new ideas and proposed solutions. The sellers and buyers interviewed also aimed to identify new ways to incorporate digital value creation activities into both B2B sales and purchase processes throughout the customer journey. This shifts value-based selling initiatives towards a more continual process, with complex professional service sales no longer being a single-point sales event.

Sellers can contribute to an understanding of the latent or undefined business needs of customers with value-based selling activities. As a way to influence customer behaviour regarding selected services, digital content marketing is a resource integration process wherein salespeople, marketers, substance experts, project personnel, buyers and other actors engage in their own sales ecosystem activities.

This study emphasizes that value-based selling is a process wherein a customer recognizes a new business development opportunity and begins to seek out additional information to increase his/her understanding of possible solutions that could solve his/her business needs. The role of selling organizations is to help customers recognize new business opportunities and provide content that facilitates the customer learning process from the recognition of an opportunity to the selection of an effective solution. This sales process may not merely be a dyadic interaction between salespeople and customers but it also concerns the activities of non-sellers and partners within the sales ecosystem.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

The research design of this study enabled us to examine the influence of digital transformation in B2B sales and purchase practices from the perspectives of both sales managers and their customers. We focused particularly on the management of value co-creation activities in the context of the digital transformation of B2B sales. The two parties reviewed these phenomena from different perspectives. The sellers adopted a more abstract and managerial perspective to value-based selling, whereas the buyers expected concrete digital content and means. Although the literature on value-based selling provides a rather broad review of inter-organizational sales and marketing interactions (Terho *et al.*, 2012; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015), research on the role of digital transformation (Guenzi and Habel, 2020) and sales ecosystem perspective is scarce (Hartmann *et al.*, 2018). This study contributes to filling the aforementioned research gaps by

emphasizing the role of value-based selling from the perspective of digital content marketing and the ecosystem.

The findings show that sales management has developed from dyadic sales interactions to the holistic management of the sales ecosystem in which sales and marketing activities blend. The role of professional salespeople is changing; they now act as value facilitators who need to be able to co-create value and solution propositions with buyers during sales meetings. In turn, buyers expect to be able to review value, product and service details beforehand on the Internet. The landscape of B2B sales management is becoming more complex as experts, specialists and project personnel are also expected to contribute to the value co-creation activities of sales and marketing at both thick and thin crossing points of sales processes. Thus, this study provides empirical evidence for [Hartmann *et al.*'s \(2018\)](#) conceptualization of the sales ecosystem.

The findings reveal that adopting a value-based selling approach in digital content marketing practices enhances the creation of relational value, which is an essential goal of B2B services ([Luu *et al.*, 2018](#); [Ritter and Walter, 2012](#); [Ulaga and Eggert, 2005](#)). This study created empirical evidence concerning the value co-creation activities of digital content marketing from the sales management perspective. The research to date in this field is relatively scarce ([Pomirleanu *et al.*, 2013](#); [Rodriguez *et al.*, 2014](#)). Enhancing the communication of value propositions through digital content marketing practices is an essential goal if B2B companies aim to move towards proactive value-based selling, wherein latent customer needs, new opportunities and company-generated value propositions merge. In line with previous research ([Homburg and Jensen, 2007](#); [Vaid *et al.*, 2020](#)), this study finds that cooperation in sales and marketing activities enhances the transformation of sales management practices.

Value-based selling calls for more cooperation among sales, marketing, subject experts and project personnel in creating and sharing educational content and means. This study extends prior research ([Koiso-Kanttila, 2004](#); [Rowley, 2008](#)) showing that digital content marketing consists of various types of content and means. Furthermore, as this study shows, the value of content directly depends on in which phase in the customer journey the content is introduced. This finding is in accordance with prior research ([Alamäki *et al.*, 2019](#)) that has shown that the customer position within the information search process is the most significant factor in encouraging purchase behaviour. To aid customers in moving through their customer journey, their mindsets need to change through value co-creation activities in sales ([Kaski *et al.*, 2019](#)). Therefore, digital value co-creation activities within the sales ecosystem aim to change the orientation of customer perspectives.

Managerial implications

The findings show that sellers need to retool their sales practices towards value-based selling, as customers tend to be more self-learned than before. The customers emphasized the lesser importance of social media in purchase processes than pragmatic blogs or presentations have claimed, which are often written by marketing automation consultants. However, the change in sales landscape is also driven by the changing behaviour of B2B customers, who expect more digital material and more new ideas and value propositions than before. This calls for closer cooperation of sales and marketing functions in sales companies. These findings show that the implementation of value-based selling practices is a management challenge rather than a technological issue.

This study reveals that the role of non-sellers as value co-creators is becoming increasingly important in B2B sales ecosystems. This means that non-sellers—such as experts, specialists and partners—also participate in value co-creation activities in the early phases of sales and purchase processes. Thus, sales companies need to involve more actors in

value co-creation sales activities than they did before to stay competitive. Because of the digital transformation of sales, value co-creation activities have emerged in addition to physical sales meetings as digital and physical touch points of customer journey within the sales ecosystem. Although many project managers and substance experts meet with their customers daily, sales companies have rarely exploited this “social selling” opportunity. Nonetheless, service companies are currently shifting their focus towards value-based sales strategies; they are forging closer business relationships with customers and playing an increasingly consultative role. Experts and project personnel, who consistently meet with business customers personally, can collect new sales prospects and share relevant content to facilitate the initial interests of customers concerning new business development opportunities.

Limitations and future research

The results of this study provide new insights into phenomena that have been under-researched. The basic limitations of this study include the relatively small target group, which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, although selling and buying organizations operate internationally to some extent, informants primarily represent the Nordic culture of business communication. The role of subject experts and project personnel in sales ecosystems merits further examination. Furthermore, more research is needed to understand how valuable digital marketing content can be effectively produced by selling organizations, as this requires the cooperation of marketing and sales functions, which are often separated in large organizations. The results of this study should also encourage researchers to empirically explore the digital transformation of sales from an ecosystem perspective in which various actors participate in value co-creation activities.

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