Solution Sales Playbook for Ascom Oy

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In this Bachelor's thesis I examined how Ascom's sales representatives obtain prospects' commitment during sales calls. The topic of raised from the sales calls I have witnessed as a Business Development Manager in Ascom Oy. Often the prospect was left unengaged to the topic and the focus of the discussion was kept on the technical features of the solution instead of customer's challenges.

In this thesis I analysed, how Ascom sales representatives utilise salesmanship in advancing the sales project, identified the handicaps that existed in the sales calls and defined how the existing handicaps can be tackled in the future. As an end-product of the thesis project I defined Solution sales playbook that describes the frame of reference that is needed in solution sales calls.

The Solutions sales playbook is based on the theoretical framework that describes the salesmanship related capabilities that each company needs from its sales representatives. I demarcated the capabilities with the following 4 elements of McKinsey's 7S Framework: Shared values, Style, Skills and Staff. I defined the theoretical framework based on Neil Rackham's SPIN model by augmenting it with Probert's & co.'s customer oriented, iterative, value adding co-creative process and schedule perspective.

The empiric part was based on the evaluation of Ascom's sales instructions and interviews of Ascom's sales team members and management representatives about the sales style used in Ascom. With the first interview round that I conducted with Ascom's sales representatives, I studied: How Ascom's sales representatives obtain customer's commitment during a sales call? And how Ascom sales representatives develop confidentiality in their customer relationships? The questions covered all the four necessary skills needed for a successful sales call: investigation, planning, interacting and closing. In the second interview round with the management representatives, I focused studying: What are Ascom's management expectations regarding sales calls?

The study revealed that Ascom's phase review policy related sales process does not identify the essence of the salesmanship. The existing sales guidelines focus purely on the definition of phases, roles and responsibilities, governance practice, templates and reviews and approvals needed during the process. There were no guidelines that defined either the customer relationship development or the engagement of the customer during the sales calls. This sales culture related deficiency was also visible in the interviews. Based on the interviews the customer was in the center of the sales calls. The sales representatives gathered more information during the sales calls and aimed to ensure that everyone shares the same understanding. Nevertheless, the sales representatives did not develop the implicit needs to explicit ones in order to obtain customer's commitment. It seemed that the mentioned aim of common understanding was more focused on Ascom's solutions than on customer's needs, although the Business Development Manager hinted the opposite with a side clause.

Abstract

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In the Solution sales playbook, I tried to address the shortcomings of Ascom's sales practice by focusing both on the ideas of modern customer-driven solution sales and Ascom's phase review discipline -oriented sales approach. The things needed to increase customer engagement have been collected to the Solution sales playbook.

Based on this thesis project and my personal experiences of solution sales, I recommend Ascom also to change the salesmanship paradigm to following direction. The essence of successful sales is in understanding the customers' needs as Jon Berghoff emphasised in Susan Cain's book Quiet: "I noticed early on that people don't buy from me because they understand what I'm selling. They buy because they feel understood." The only way to learn to understand the customers is to be in a constant interaction with them. That enables the development of a confidential relationship that ensures one can understand customers' needs.

Keywords
Customer centric, Obtaining the commitment, Solution sales, SPIN-selling, Salesmanship

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1 Introduction

This is a product-type of a Bachelor's thesis for the Degree Program in International business in the major specialization of marketing taught at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences.

1.1 Background

Globally operating Ascom (Ascom Holding AG) is Swiss stock market listed holding company. Ascom's focus is on healthcare ICT and mobile workflow solutions. Ascom Oy is the Finnish subsidiary of Ascom AG. Ascom Oy is a sales company that sells, delivers and maintains the products that Ascom's product lines develop in the three Research & Development (R&D) centers. The main sales focus in healthcare ICT. (Ascom, 2020.)

In my current position my task is to develop Ascom's information management business in Finland, plan and develop the sales strategy for the solutions belonging to my portfolio and facilitate and support the sales activities of our four (4) Key Account Managers (KAM) that have regional sales areas. The opening shot for this project emerged from the current challenges related to selling of medical device information management solution at Ascom. The fact that the frame of reference for solution selling was total missing underlined that need for this thesis.

The thesis presents the sales skills needed for selling Ascom Digistat medical device information management solution. The required skillset has been reasoned with the solution sales theories and practical experiences regarding solution sales. The end-product of this thesis project was a solution sales playbook. The playbook describes the things needed to successfully advance in the sales process with every sales call. In today's, more customer focused environment the customers must be in the center of the sales process. "This is a new era – a time when there are more options for a buyer that ever before. More information on their fingertips. More companies are doing similar things." As Max Altschuler (2019, xiv) says in the preface of the book Sales Engagement. A company needs to deliver a modern buying experience for their customers, the sales engagement strategies are needed for both medium and message (Medina, Altschuler & Kosoglow. 2019, 28).

According to Mark Kosoglow (2019, 7) the needed difference can be described in the following way. "The ability to stand out in the crowd and help people to understand why they need your help is something that that must be part of sales organisations DNA." No matter how fluent the sales pitch and impactful the solution promoted is, if the prospects do not know who you are and why you can help them, the sales success will remain a fantasy.

Kosoglow crystallizes his thoughts about the needed sales approach to the following sentence. “Only brands that deliver a modern buying experience will have a foothold in a customer centric universe.” (Medina, Altschuler & Kosoglow. 2019, 27.)

Based on the above I claim that it is essential for a solution sales organisation to focus on the relevant things. According to my experience the only way to learn what is relevant for a customer is to spend more time with her/him. A seller needs to get information from the customer in order to know what is relevant and what is not. As we all know, customers do not share insights to all sales representatives they meet. This means that a customer does not usually share any insights in the first meeting. The variable needed to solve this equation is trust. Trust is always built in interaction, little by little. In a modern world where solution buying process has become quite complicated with multiple options data sources and buying team members the buyers time is scarce. They do not want to invest they time in vain. Buyers want to allocate time only with individuals who can add value in relevant way to a challenge they need to solve. Serial entrepreneur Gary Vaynerchuks’ statement about social media “Content is king, but context is God” (garyvaynerchuck.com. 2021), hits the target also regarding solution sales and relationship building. This means that the seller must be able to provide the buyer information, that helps him in the buying task. (Gartner. 2021.)

1.2 Project objective

The goal of each sales call is to advance in the sales. This can be achieved only by obtaining customer’s commitment. There for all the sales organisations aim to ensure that the sales representatives can obtain the customers commitment and take a step further for closing the sales with every sales call they make. In this thesis I aimed to evaluate how Ascom sales representatives engage the customers during the sales calls. The evaluation was done by comparing the findings of the qualitative research to theoretical framework based on the SPIN model and literature about customer engagement. In the evaluation I tried to identify the handicaps related to obtaining customer’s commitment during the sales calls. Based on the evaluation I defined the Solution sales playbook that provides a frame of reference that is required in solution sales. The utilisation of the frame of reference helps sales representatives to succeed in engaging the customers they meet.

The project tasks were:
PT1. Definition of the theoretical framework for the project. Customer focused solution sales activities that increase customers engagement (SPIN model).
PT2. Description how the current Ascom’s sales process is used in practice

PT 2.1. As described in Ascom's quality system

PT 2.2. Based on the feedback from the sales representatives (3 regions)

PT 2.3. Based on the feedback from the Country Manager (Finland) / Global Business development Director

PT 2.4. Analysis of the current Ascom's sales practice

PT 3. Definition of Sales practice that obtains customer's commitment

PT3.1. Definition of the needed activities to obtain customer's commitment

PT 3.2. Definition of Solution sales Playbook for Ascom

PT 4. Evaluation

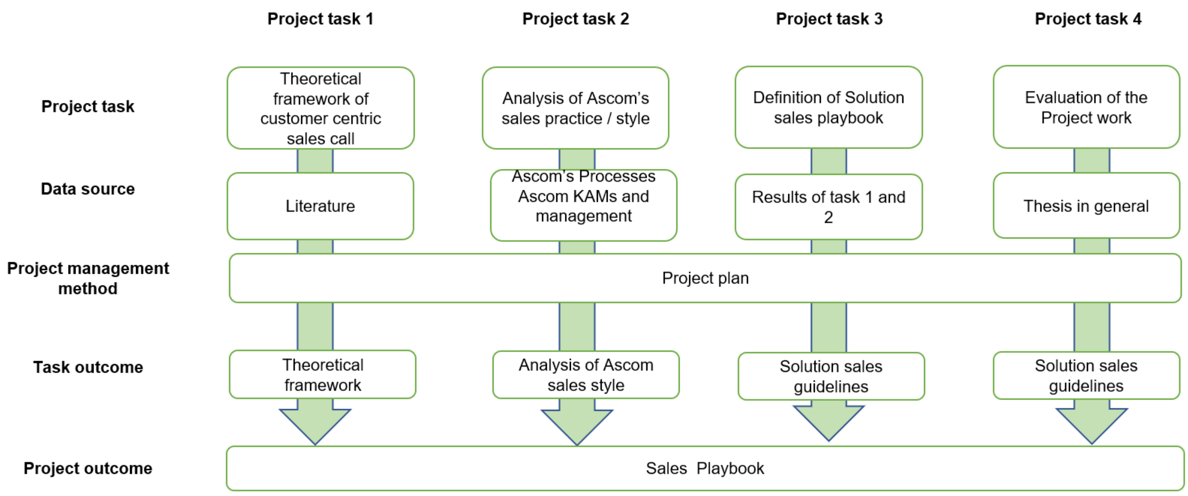

Figure 1. Project management design

1.3 Demarcation

Obtaining customer's commitment is an imperative when selling medical device information management system or any other solution that requires major investment. In solution sales act the focus is in the interaction and in the management of expectations. Therefore, a solution sales playbook that helps sales representatives to obtain customer's commitment must focus on salesmanship. The playbook I defined presents the activities used before and during a sale call in order to get customer engaged.

The salesmanship is persons capability to manage all the aspects needed to advance in the sales towards an offer that meets customer's needs. The needed aspects are contacting a customer, investigating and understanding problems of a customer, communicating with a customer, co-operating with a customer and obtaining customers commitment to proposed action. For narrowing down the focus of the project I used McKinsey 7 S framework defined by Waterman, Peters and Phillips. (1980, 17–25.) I used three elements of 7S framework that describe the capabilities that a salesman needs: Shared Values, Style and Skills. And an element that every employee of a company represents, Staff. The 7S framework is described in Chapter 4 Obtaining customer’s commitment.

1.4 International aspect

Ascom is an international company. We apply the very same standard operating procedures in every subsidiary. This means that the hard elements of 7S framework are the same in Ascom‘s every regional sales organisation. In order to ensure that the regional deviations in usage of soft elements and values were considered the interviewees represented four organisations of Ascom corporation. Out of the five interviewees two were from Finland, one from the Netherlands, one from Germany and one from Italy. In addition to above two of the interviewees had a global focus in their work.

1.5 Benefits

The main benefit of the project for Ascom is gaining more efficiency to the solutions sales. The increased efficiency of the sales means shorter sales cycle. The shorter sales cycle will improve the predictability of ongoing fiscal year’s sales. The better predictability means more accurate budget control. The utilization of customer centric sales approach will provide more suitable solutions for the customer. Each solution will be especially planned and customised to tackle customers certain, relevant problem. Personally, I benefited in two ways. Firstly, I was able to extend my knowledge about the customer centric sales approach. The project helped me to figure out how it can be utilized for selling medical device information management solutions for public organisations. Secondly, the playbook will ease up my work as a Business Development Manager in the future, due it empowers the Key Account Managers to work more independently.

1.6 Key concepts

The idea of the sales is to actively promote company’s offering to the prospects, attract the prospects, raise customers interest, obtain customer’s commitment to presented value proposal, close the sales in a successful manner and get profit for the company. The best way to meet the goals, is to use a standardized approach based on the company’s mission, vision, strategy and standard operating processes. As explained in the chapter 1.3. Demarcation I focused on salesmanship and on the sales act handled according SPIN model.

The thesis presents the theoretical framework of SPIN model and defines a customer centric solutions sales playbook describing the things are needed to be considered in every sales call.

Selling: “The process of creating value for the customer through personal interaction with buyers and other individuals within the customer organisation” (Cuevas, Donaldson & Lemmens 2016, 3).

SPIN selling: “The idea of SPIN model is to uncover the customers’ problems and develop his needs by asking 4 types of questions: Situation, Problem, Implication, and Need-payoff questions. The Spin model is often used sequentially. It starts with situation questions to establish the background. The problem questions are asked to uncover difficulties. Thirdly the implication questions are used to develop the seriousness of the problem. Finally need-payoff questions are used to get the customer tell about the benefits of the proposed solution. SPIN sequence is not a rigid formula, but it should be used flexibly in order to handle the sales call in an efficient manner.“ (Rackham 2009, 189-190.)

Salesmanship: “The set of skills and competencies that unpin the effective customer management and interaction” (Cuevas, Donaldson & Lemmens 2016, 3).

Sales call: “Usually pre-arranged, face-to-face meeting between a salesperson and a customer or prospect for the purpose of generating a sale” (Business Dictionary 2020).

Sales call stages

Rackham (2009, 188) defines the sales call stages in the following manner

- **Preliminaries**: “The warming up events and the start of the call.”
- **Investigating**: “Finding out facts, information and needs”
- **Demonstrating capability**: “Showing that a sales representative has something worthwhile to offer.”
- **Obtaining commitment**: “Gaining an agreement to proceed to a further stage of the sales.”

2 Project management methods

This project focused on enhancing Ascom's sales practice and defining a playbook that helps to obtain the customer commitment on each sales call. The existing Ascom's sales process and the practices were evaluated and compared to the customer's centric solution selling model that is described in the chapter 4. Obtaining customer commitment. The theoretical framework is based on Neil Rackham's SPIN model and fresh literature and articles about customer engagement. As it is explained in the chapter 4 the only way to ensure that the sales process is proceeded to the wanted direction is to ensure that customer is committed to sales process and is expecting the next step the sales representative proposes to them.

2.1 Data sources

The material used for comparing Ascom's sales practice versus the customer centric solution sales model was Ascom's Sales Process documentation and sales instructions (Ascom Sales Process Description, Ascom Sales Directive). In addition to existing Ascom Documentation, I conducted two short interview rounds. In the first interview round, I interviewed two Account Managers and a Global Business Development Manager. The aim was to investigate, what is the sales style and skills they use and how do they success in obtaining customers commitment during the sales calls. In the second interview round I interviewed Ascom's Management representatives, Country Manager and Global Business Development Director. The aim of the second interview round was to find out management's expectations and opinion about the used sales approach. The idea of the interview was to cover four dimensions related to salesmanship: investigation, planning, interacting and closing (obtaining commitment) skills. The Ascom's sales representatives are the ones that mostly deal with the customers and it is in their best interest to obtain the customers' commitment and guide the buying process towards Ascom's solutions. In addition to this it is important to know, if the management's expectations are a line with reality.

The interview results were analysed and interpreted by using qualitative methods. That includes identifying and mapping of the categories, patterns and relationships within the collected data. In qualitative analysis the focus is on meanings of the data. The researcher constructs a "reality" according his interpretations of the answer of the interviewees. A qualitative analysis needs focus on the following questions: What do the findings mean, why did they occur and what can be concluded about the findings. A good qualitative data analysis includes findings regarding the context of the interview. In a qualitative analysing it is essential to keep in mind that the researcher's as well as other people's opinions may have an impact on the results. (Schutt 2011 321- 323.)

2.2 The reliability and validity

To identify the handicaps of Ascom's sales practice, I evaluated how the Ascom's Sales representatives obtain the customer commitment during the sales calls they make. The evaluation is based both on existing Ascom's Sales guidelines and interviews of Ascom's sales team members. The sample was based on selective sampling in order to get international sample of both sales representatives and management members. The selection was based the interviewees knowledge on the topic.

The results of the evaluation were compared to a theoretic framework, that was based on literature about solution sales and customer engagement. The results of this thesis cannot be generalized to any sales organization. But these results address only the development needs in current Ascom sales practice. Nevertheless, the Solution sales playbook that, tackles the handicaps of the salesmanship can be used by other sales organisations. In addition to this the very same interviews can be made for other solution sales organisation to evaluate the status of the salesmanship of their sales team.

3 Case company

Ascom (Ascom Holding AG) is a swiss public, Swiss stock market listed holding company. Ascom operates internationally via 18 daughter companies that employ 1 300 professionals. Ascom's focus is on healthcare ICT and mobile workflow solutions. The vision of Ascom is "to close digital information gaps allowing for the best possible decisions – anytime and anywhere" Ascom's headquarter is in Baar, Switzerland. The net revenue of Ascom in 2019 was 282,9 million CHF out of which 64% was gained from healthcare sector, the other remaining 36 percent was earned from Enterprise and OEM sectors. (Ascom, 2020.)

Ascom Oy is the Finnish subsidiary of Ascom AG that employs 42 professionals in Finland. In Finland the sales focus is almost purely in healthcare ICT where Ascom sells 3 solutions: nurse call system, communication system and medical device information management system. The Finnish headquarters is in Turku. (Ascom, 2020.)

4 Obtaining customer’s commitment

The purpose of the theoretical framework is to describe how a sales team can obtain customer commitment with a sales plan and activities they conduct while selling a solution requiring a major investment successfully. The sales tactics, the sales plan and the sales activities are based company’s mission, vision, strategy, sales strategy and the sales process of the company.

4.1 Solutions sales

Solution sales aim to solve a specific problem and tackle its implications in a customer organisation. During the solution sales process a sales representative co-creates a needed change in the customer processes with the customer and present a solution, that will enable the more fluent process desired by the customer. The solutions sold are usually expensive. The sales processes are long and on the buyer’s side there is a team of stakeholders that all need to be convinced about the suitability of the solution. (Jobber, D. Lancaster, G. Le Meunier-Fitzhugh. 2019, 274.) Medina, Altschuler & Kosoglow describe this fact in the book Sales Engagement (2019,122) by referring CEB study that shows that approximately 6,8 decision makers are involved to business to business purchase decisions. The decision maker represents different buying personas of the buying organisation.

4.1.1 Solution sales stages

Solution sales is a process containing 3 stages. The first phase is a customer engagement stage that takes place before actual active selling. During the engagement phase the sales manager builds up a relationship based on transparency, competence, credibility and trust. The second step is an actual selling phase during which a sales representative investigates and sorts out customers team, drivers behind the need, the suitability of “our solution” and ways to differentiate the value of “our solution”. During the last phase, the after sales phase, the seller must ensure that the value promise has been realized. This happens by verifying the impact of the change that the deployment of the new solution enabled. After that the seller adapts the approach to meet the customers changed needs and expands the existing relationship. (Andersen & Stein 2016, xx - xxi.)

4.1.2 Customer’s needs

During sales process a sales representative has continuously to investigate prospect’s problems, needs and desires to ensure that a prospect is approached from a relevant point of view. There are two type of needs: implicit needs and explicit needs. Implicit needs describe the problems that the prospect has. Prospect might e.g. state the following: “I do not like the fact, that single patient rooms and the general floorplan of the new unit, make it impossible to see all the patience with a glance.” With explicit needs, the prospect states clearly, what they want. In the previous example case, the prospect could formulate the explicit need in the following way: “We need a system, that collects and forwards the relevant information form the medical devices and visualizes the medical device alarms both centrally and mobile. The functionality is needed to enable immediate intervention when a patient’s condition deteriorates.” (Rackham. 2009, 57 – 59.)

4.1.3 Buying signals

The expressed needs are buying signals, that indicate prospects commitment to the discussed topic and proposed approach. In small sales where the cost of the purchase is small, and the discussion partner can make the decision immediately, obtaining the commitment is a buying signal. According to the one of the Rackham’s studies (2009, 58 – 59) the implicit needs directly reflect the sales success in small sales. Nevertheless, implicit needs do not indicate the success in solution sales. In solution sales the implicit needs about the customers problems are just the starting point. To succeed it is essential how the sales representative handles the problems that he has come aware of. In Solution sales the sales representative must further develop the needs and evaluate if the problem is acute and serious enough to justify the needed investment. It is also worth noting that in the solution sale the real cost of the investment is higher than just the purchase price. The effort needed to deploy the solution needs also to be taken in to account. In his study about the sales success Rackham (2009, 62) verified that the explicit needs the customer has revealed during the sales process, reflect the sales success in solution sales.

While doing a purchasing decision, buyer always balance two opposing factors. Is the seriousness of the problem the purchase would solve greater than the cost of the solution discussed? Out of these two factors the buyers form the value equation they use for comparison. If the buyers consider the problem larger than the cost of solving it, then they probably buy it. Again, if the problem in question is small and the cost of the solution is high, then the decision to buy is unlikely. (Rackhamn. 2009, 61.)

4.2 7 S Framework

McKinsey 7 S framework was defined by Peters and Waterman at 1980 (Singh 2013; Story 2020; Waterman, Peters & Philips. 1980). The framework contains 7 elements that describe the different elements regarding the efficiency of an organisation.

- **Strategy:** The plan to build and maintain competitive advantage over the competition.
- **Structure:** The way that the organisation is structured describing who is reporting to whom.
- **Systems:** The ways of working / the processes that the employees utilise in their activities.
- **Shared Values:** The gore values of the company presenting company's culture and general working ethics.
- **Style:** The leadership style used.
- **Staff:** The team and its general capabilities.
- **Skills:** The competences of the employees.

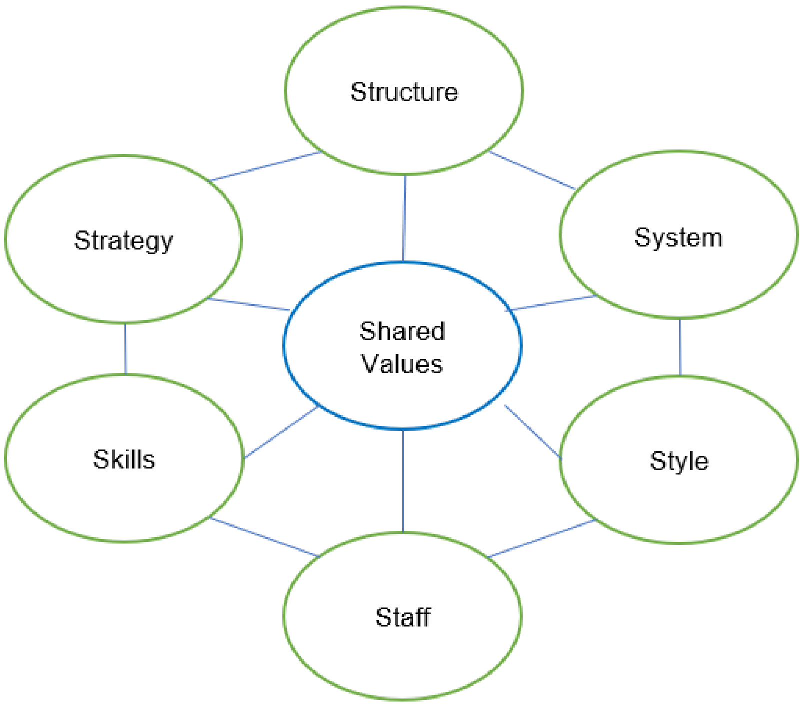

Figure 2. McKinsey 7 S framework (Story 2020; Waterman, Peters & Philips. 1980).

Shared values are the cornerstone of the framework. All the other elements are based on those. Shared values state why the company was originally founded and what it stands for. Shared values reflect the original vision of the founders. The development of the values will impact to all the other elements. The other six elements of the framework are divided as "Hard" and "Soft" elements. Strategy, structure, and systems are considered as hard elements. Those are easy to define because they are tangible and management can directly influence them e.g. organisations structure, IT tools. The soft elements: style, staff and skills are more difficult to describe because they are less tangible and more influenced by the culture than the actions of the management. Both hard and soft elements are as important as important to the success of the company. (Singh 2013; Story 2020; Waterman, Peters & Philips. 1980.)

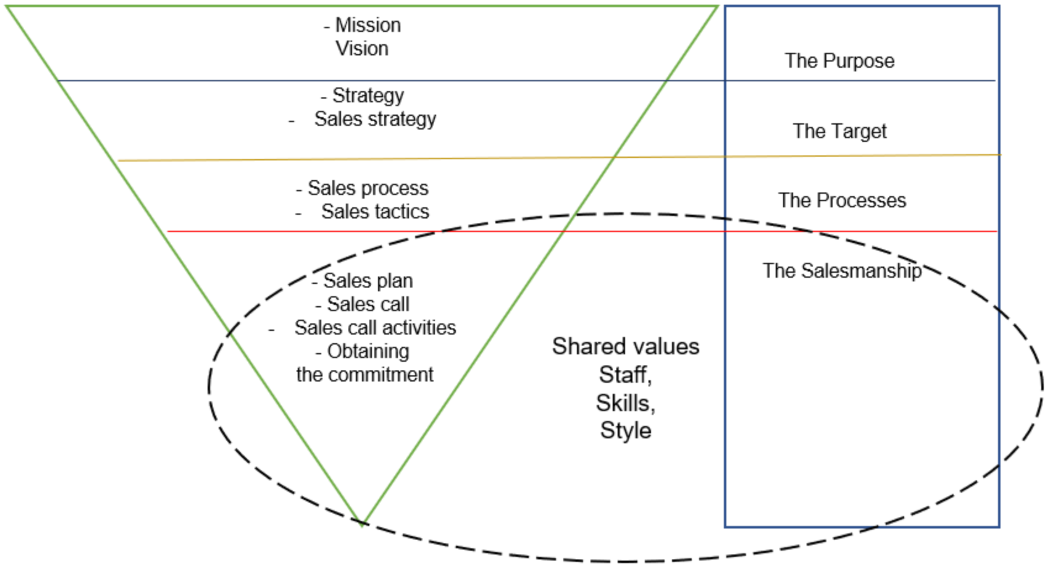

Figure 3. The 7S framework elements that impact for obtaining the customers commitment during a sales call are directly related to the salesmanship.

4.3 Customer oriented sales

Traditionally the three cornerstones of selling skills have been: finding out the customer's needs, handling the objections and closing the sales. These skills have been used since 1920's and they still prove to be efficient in small sales. Anyhow the most corporations know that something else is needed for winning cases in major sales. The major sales are a different game. it is not just a onetime investment it is a long-term partnership where the customers trust to seller plays a significant role. The customers and the purchasing process utilized are more sophisticated. Nowadays the customers focus is in finding a business partner who understands their problem. (Rackham 2009, 1-21.)

According to studies conducted by Andersen and Stein (2016, 5) the customers spend only minuscule of their time with a company's representative even when the customer relationship is successful. "it is likely that your customer spends less than 2 percent of their time (only 40 hours per year!) actively buying from you". The only way to increase company's importance to customers is to make them reprioritize and allocate more of their time to you. To be successful in sales is not related to sales training, sales tips, sales forms, sales processes, sales strategies. The secret is in interacting with customers and in getting customers engaged to you and the company you are representing. In their study

Andersen and Stein found out that customers value authentic relationship which is based on transparency, competence, credibility, and trust. The research proves that the customers are even ready to pay more for the qualities listed. This means that solution selling is always personal process where the seller must approach the buyers in personal manner that meets their needs regarding both content and context. (Andersen & Stein 2016, 5.)

A sales organisations expertise about customer domain and its ability to create value are the sources of the competitive advantage, when selling high-tech products requiring major investment. Due to this the focus is, according to Cuevas, Donaldson and Lemmens, shifting from selling to delivering value propositions and co-creating value with a customer. The strategical principles utilized for value co-creation are different than the ones used for traditional selling of products and services (Cuevas, Donaldson & Lemmens 2016, 119; Rackham 2009, 1-21).

4.3.1 How to put a customer in the center

Capability to put a customer in the center is the most essential sales skill in solution sales. Probert, Dissel, Farrukh, Mortara, Thorn & Phaal (2013) described the phases required for co-creating a value proposal with the customer

1. The sales process starts by identifying the problem that exits in the domain.
2. After that selected, potential customers facing the problem are approached.
3. During the customer meting the focus of the dialog is in investigating the customer’s needs.
4. When the customer has explained his needs, the existing problems and their implications, the customer and the sales organisation co-create a suitable solution to tackle the problems.
5. The defined solution is presented to the stakeholders of the customer-side.

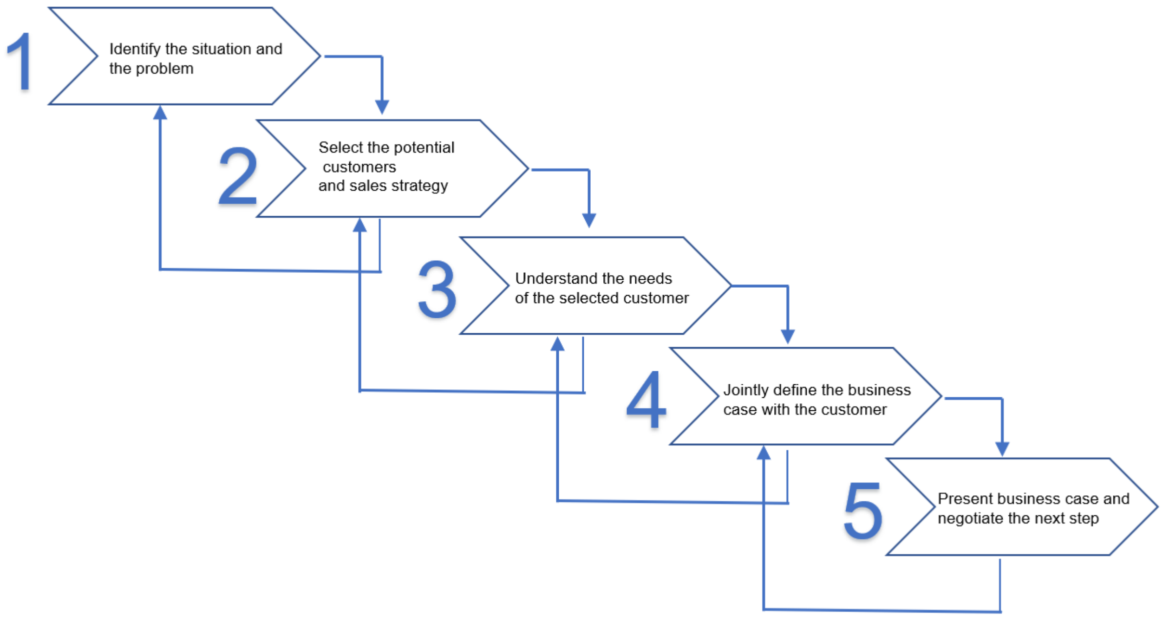

Figure 4. Customer oriented, iterative, value adding co-creative process (Probert, Dissel, Farrukh, Mortara, Thorn & Phaal, 2013).

Cuevas, Donaldson & Lemmens (2016, 119-122) defined 4 principles needed in the value creation process as follows:

- Focusing on ends instead of means.
- Turning the customer to active partner.
- Developing value propositions based on organisations capabilities.
- Focusing on learning via dialog and building relationships.

The development of customer centric value focused relationship with a customer is a long-term work. It is not enough just to make connections with the contacts at customer end. Connections made must lead to authentic, trustful, credible, and transparent relationships of the aligned teams. (Andersen & Stein. 105 – 120.) The cornerstone of the trustful business relationship is the internal alignment. All the company representatives interacting with the customer must sing from the same song sheet. According to Andersen & Stein (2016. 109 – 111) this means in practice that the company is:

- Presenting only one face to a customer
  - All the company representatives behave in a same way in a business conduct.
- Communicating in consistent way with a customer
  - All the company representatives communicating with the customers, tell the same story and keep the commitments that the company representative has given.
- Developing the needed strengths that provide added value to a customer
  - The company possess all the experts needed to provide added value during the sales phase.
- Leveraging the value of entire company for a customer
  - The company is always utilizing the most knowledgeable experts to create even more additional value for the customer.

The alignment described above must always happen on multiple levels. Nevertheless, the message must always be the same. The experts involved in a delivery project, discussing with the experts of the customer organization, the company management interacting with unit purchasing the solution and the company's conceptual message delivered to the customer organisation have to present the solution and its deployment related topics in a similar manner (Andersen & Stein 2016, 112 -113.)

Andersen & Stein (2016. 117 – 120) identify 4 relationship levels in customer engagement:

- Vendor
    - For a vendor all the sales cases are competitions. Customer's reason to buy from a supplier on a vendor level is usually price.
- Preferred supplier
    - A preferred supplier is the known supplier that has supporters in a customer organisation. The supplier that knows the domain and possible problems related to it. Can deliver additional value that solves some of the customer's problems.
- Planning partner
    - A supplier that is necessary for the customer is usually upgraded to a planning partner level. The customer wants to consult the partner regarding its plans and even discuss the new plans with it. The planning partner has supporters in the customer organization. The customer acknowledges the added value the partner can provide for them.
- Trusted advisor
    - A supplier customer considers essential to themselves. The customer wants to build a strategic relations ship with the trusted advisor.

Customers evaluate their relationships with the suppliers according to these levels based on certain criteria. It is human to consider both professional and personal relationships as functional. Some salespeople tend to evaluate the customer relationship in far too optimistic manner. Unfortunately, it is also misleading and can jeopardize the future sales cases by ignoring the required actions to win stronger foothold in advance. (Andersen & Stein 2016, 117 – 120.)

4.3.2 "Gut feeling is not good enough"

To attract customer's attention, a sales representative must ensure that he approaches the customer in a right way. To do that the sales representative must utilize the previous learnings already in the planning phase. The company's information-based sales process and practices shall be followed. When this is done, the intended sales can always be conducted in a way that the same kind of buyer personas prefer e.g. via email. (Medina, Altschuler & Kosoglow. 2019, 12 – 15.)

The most essential thing, that needs to be checked from the customer, is if they need the solution that has been discussed about or not. No one will invest money to a solution that solves a problem that does not exist. The magnitude of the problem that customer wants to solve, does not have to be big as long as the problem exists and has implications that the customer has identified. In addition to above it is crucial that the trustful relationship that is needed, has been built already when there has not been an active buying process going on. (Medina, Altschuler & Kosoglow. 2019, 44, 116.)

4.4 SPIN selling

SPIN selling is a solution sales model for major sales that was developed by Neil Rackham and his team, when they noticed during a research project that the traditional sales skills did not provide results in major sales.

Rackham described (2009, 188 – 195) SPIN model as a consultative approach. The sales representative builds a trustful relationship with a customer before offering a solution. SPIN is an acronym for Situation, Problems, Implications and Need-payoff. It describes the investigative questions that that should be asked in the certain order from the customer during the sales call.

- **Situational questions**
- **Investigating questions**
- **Implication questions**
- **Need-pay off questions**

The idea is to get information of customers situation, problems related to the situation, implications of the problems which customer considers relevant and benefits that the customer will gain when the problem is solved.

Each sales call contains 4 stages (Rackham. 2009, 11 - 12):

- **Preliminaries**
    - Opening the call
    - Small talk and introduction
- **Investigating**
    - Verifying that sales representative has a right understanding about the customer organisation and knowledge of all the stakeholders regarding the topic discussed.
    - Uncovering customers problems, needs and development plans.
    - Developing the implicit needs to explicit needs.
- **Proofing capability**
    - Demonstrating the capability of the offered solution with a presentation or a demo.
    - Developing the implicit needs to explicit needs.
- **Obtaining commitment**
    - Getting customers commitment to next step of the sales process e.g. customer commits to attend a solution demonstration or to visit a reference site. Sometimes it can even be a commitment to order the solution presented.

4.5 Solution sales in a nutshell

The things needed to utilize in a successful solution sale process can be crystalised in a following way. The goal of each sales goal is the next sales call. All succescul sales calls have a goal to which the prospect is committed to. The commitements gained are the steps needed to the targeted advancing defined in the case specific sales plan. The target is developed dynamically based on the information got from the prospect. During the sales call the focus must be on the prospect's challenges, needs and plans. It is also essential that the sales representative convinces the prospect that he understands prospects's processes, the exisiting challenges and their relevance to the prospect's operations. In addition to above, one must proof that he is able to provide additional value to prospect's processes by co-creating and collaborating with the prospect. This iterativity and utilization of SPIN-model is visualized in figure 5 below.

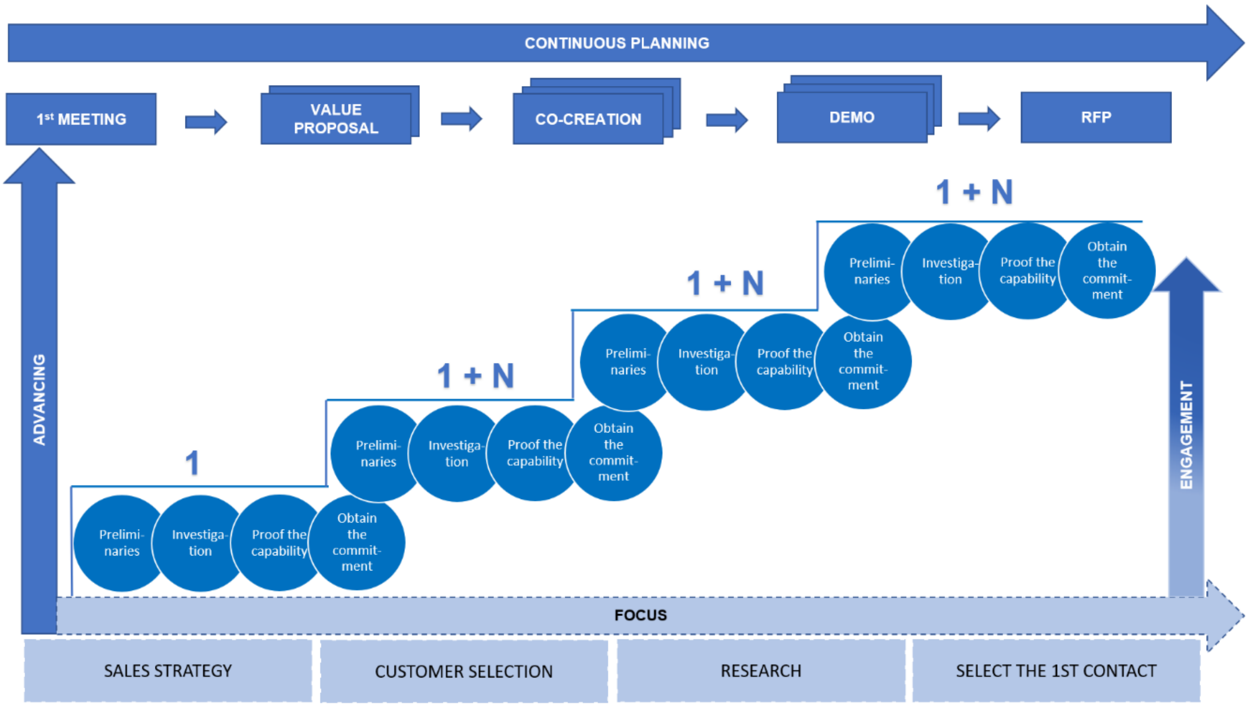

Figure 5. Rackham's SPIN model augmented with Probert's & co.'s customer oriented, iterative, value adding co-creative process and schedule prespectives . The phase of the process is mentioned on top of the picture. Each phase indicates the goal of the previous sales call. Some sales phases require several sales calls. Each sales call contains the same four SPIN- stages as illustrated in the picture. Both the prospect's engagement and sellers chance to win increases after each succesfull sales call.

5 Commissioning company's situation and the need

In my current position as an Ascom's sales team member, I had noticed that there are several handicaps in solution sales practices. At Ascom we apply phase review discipline (PRD) in our Standard Operation Processes (SOP). Phase review discipline is based on stage-gate process that divides the effort into distinct time-sequenced stages separated by management decision gates. The responsible individuals must complete a relevant set of tasks in each stage prior obtaining the results to management approval to proceed to the next stage of process. (PDMA. 2020.) When a stage-gate process is utilized in sales each gate review is a "GO" or "NO-GO" -decision. PRD is a concept that provide key communication opportunities as processes and projects move proceed via process specific steps. Gates and reviews related to those also provide a formal means for controlling project risk, monitoring scope changes, and maintaining stakeholder interest. (Stratton 2003.)

Although we had a process in place. We did not have the steps that are essential for succeeding in solution selling. There were no instructions that described how the sales act should be planned, managed and conducted. Susan Cain described the essence of the salesmanship in her book Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking. She wrote about Jon Berghoff who was a stereotypical introvert that first turned out to be a superstar salesman and then a leader and a coach. Nowadays Jon leads leadership coaching company that he founded 2015. According to Cain Jon's secret is his ability to take a role of advisor instead of persuading salesman. Jon summed up his abilities as follows: "I noticed early on that people don't buy from me because they understand what I'm selling. They buy because they feel understood. " (Cain 2013, 238-239.)

5.1 Ascom's processes

Ascom's practices and processes are guided by a certificated quality system which purpose and goals are defined in the Quality Manual. The Quality Manual defines specific responsibilities for the quality management system and its' processes. Currently Ascom has quality certificates related to product and specification development, marketing, sales, production, installation and servicing of information, communication and workflow solutions for healthcare including software, hardware and integration with medical device and patient related information system. (Ascom. 2021.)

- ISO 9001: 2015 Quality Management System, Design, development, manufacturing management, marketing, sales, production, installation and servicing of information, communication and workflow solutions including software and hardware
- ISO 13485:2016 Medical devices, quality management systems, requirements for regulatory purposes
- ISO 14001:2015 Environmental Management System Standard
- ISO 27001:2013 Information Security Management System standard

5.2 Sales process

Sales process and practicalities were defied in three documents: Sales Directive, Sales Process and Bid Process. These documents aim to harmonize the sale activities, standardize sales governance, create common way of working across Ascom for building and develop long term customer relationships resulting business growth. This means that the focus of the sales process is in the phases of the process, the roles and responsibilities, the governance practice, the templates and reviews and the approvals needed. There was a rule book that explained who does what, if Ascom's Sales representative has managed to engage a customer to Ascom's value proposal. It seems that Ascom aimed to manage the financial risk of the sales but did not aim to engage the customers. (Ascom. 2021.)

5.3 The Sales practice

The results of the interviews that were conducted are presented in this chapter. As I mentioned in chapter 2.1. Data sources I conducted two interview rounds. In the first interview round I interviewed two Account Managers and the Global Business Development Manager and investigated in the following things:

- How do they plan and conduct the sales calls (Investigation)?
- How do they obtain customers commitment (Proof capability and engage the prospect)?
- How do they develop confidentiality a in their customer relationships (developing the relationship)?

In the second round I interviewed a Country Manager and Global Business Development Manager in order find out:

- What are the management's expectations regarding the sales calls?
- How the sales representatives meet the management's expectations currently?

5.3.1 The skills, expertise and development of those

Sales representants

Three interviewees work in a close interaction with the customers. Two work in a direct sales role in country organisations and one in global business development role. The other Sales representative has a formal business training and a long experience in the sales from a different business domain. The other sales representative told that he has “drifted to sales role “ from a technically oriented role. He has learned the sales skills by dealing with the solutions of the company while delivering those to the customers. The Business Development Manager has a clinical background. He is originally a nurse that has worked some years in pharmaceutical companies focusing on a clinical workflow development role. He doesn’t have any business training, but he said that he has learned the needed selling skills by interacting with the customers. All the interviewees felt that they have developed the needed salesman when interacting with the customers and discussing with the colleagues. In addition to this a personal strength providing the capability to act in the role and passion related to Ascom’s business domain were emphasised.

Management

According to the Business Development Director whose focus is in more clinically oriented processes and products, it is essential that Ascom’s sales representatives have clinical or healthcare expertise and even training. The Country Manager mentioned that the backgrounds of the exiting sales team are heterogenic but did not underline any significant development needs in the skillset of the team members.

5.3.2 Investigation

Sales representants

Because Ascom applies account management approach the sales representatives have a limited, account-based focus on the market. Nevertheless, the method that triggered new sales calls was different. The other Account Manager contacted the customers and prospects on regular basis via phone, video meeting application or in a face to face meeting. *“So, three or four times a year I have to call them, I have to video call them, to tell them how the market is. What we can do as Ascom side for them. To learn whatever, they have for challenges in the company.”* In addition to regular calls to prospects he told that as a supplier of digital solutions, he uses modern social media tools to communicate with the healthcare professionals of his area. *“So, I need to put in social media as extra a communication channel to inform and to stay in contact with these prospects.”* The other Account Manager told that he monitors the customers and prospects by utilizing different kind of information sources like public announcements, customers websites and his business or personal contacts. "*When I, for example, hear from somebody in my network that this prospect might have something, which is interesting to us.*" If he finds out that some prospect planning to purchase something new or someone has new development projects where Ascom's solutions could add value, he contacts the prospect. The Business Development Manager mentioned that he utilises a lot of his old global network of nurses and physicians to get more information and figure what kind of developments are proceeding in different parts of the Globe. *"I use a lot of my old network from nurses and physicians around the globe to get more information. So basically, how do I choose, it is by mailing and chatting like you would do with your friends."* Based on the above, Ascom's Account Managers approach the prospects to conduct a dialog about the prospect's situation and propose a meeting where the topic could be discussed. *"Just to gather the information, who we should meet even if the customer or the prospect don't have development project or business case ongoing, is a good reason to meet the prospect."* The interviewees prepare to the sales call with the material they have. *"I try to collect all available information what I have."* This includes the information shared and documented in the previous meetings or discussions with the prospect, the material available on the prospect's websites and discussions with the colleagues that have visited the prospect. Based on the information Account Managers try to create a vision about the prospect's challenges and needs and decided what is the key message to them. Based on the vision the sales representative drafts the presentation and invites the Ascom experts that are needed in the meeting to convince the customer

Management

According to management the selection of prospects to meet should be based on the existing network. *"Typically, what I also suggest, is to start from the friend's customers. It would make sense to meet a prospect who is somehow connected to Ascom. An existing customer or someone to whom the customer has recommended Ascom's solution."* The preparation to the meeting should had been contained as much information as possible. The information that is available in the prospect's website or elsewhere in the internet e.g. research reports conducted by someone working for the prospect, partnerships that they have with other vendors. "*You can collect a lot of information about research may be performed by that hospital.*" Naturally the sales team members should utilise their network to conduct a background check regarding the customer and its activities and plans on a specific site or project. *"It should also be nice to have information as well from other people you know. Should be nice to think if you know somebody that knows that customer."*

5.3.3 Obtaining the customer's commitment

Sales representants

All three, the Account Managers and the Business Development Manager considered that it's important to define a goal for each sales call. They all indicated that the definition of the goal starts by checking the customer's expectations and requirements regarding the meeting. The general idea mentioned was that the goal is agreed in a dialog with the prospects point of contact in order to engage him already during the planning phase. *"I will discuss the agenda for the meeting. So, I think it is important to determine the agenda before you go in the meeting. So, I always ask the customer to put in agenda items as well."* After agreeing the goal, a more detailed agenda that contains the necessary steps to meet the customer's requirements will be defined. The Business Development Manager mentioned that for him, it is essential to ensure that both Ascom and prospect interpret the goal, the agenda and the possible action points agreed in the meeting, in a same way. In addition to this he told that he defines a list of questions he needs to ask from the customer before the meeting. All the interviewees said that they will ensure that the goals are met by keeping the notes and clarifying questions if needed. *"I have my ten points honestly prepared when I go there."* As a final step to ensure the engagement they said that they check the prospects opinion and verify that the goals are met by asking the customer in the end of the meeting: "*My aim is that we all understand in the end, what we have talked about. And what is the target and the aim to go for. So, I want everybody to be on the right track at the end of the meeting.*" The interviewees mentioned that they will try to verify the prospects engagement in two additional ways. First by delivering the minutes of the meeting for the prospect and secondly with a follow up by conducting a call or sending an email to the contact person at the prospect's side. During the follow up dialog the sales representatives will check the status of the action points that the prospect was supposed to conduct and share the status of the Ascom's action points.

Management

The interviewees representing management told that it is important that Ascom representatives clarify two things before the meeting. Firstly, they should understand what the prospect is expecting to gain from the meeting. *"it's important to understand, clarify the expectation of the meeting from customer perspective"*. Secondly, they must know where they are aiming for with the meeting. *"You have to have clear in your mind the challenge they are facing."* The idea to meet the goals of the meeting is a simple one, focus on the challenge the prospect is facing. Listen to them in order to learn more about the prospect and the challenges they want to solve. The Business Development Director stated that it is important to start the dialog from customers challenges and continue to Ascom's ability to solve those. “*Start from that and immediately solve their problems.”* He also emphasised the importance of promoting the reference sites that have used Ascom’s solutions to solve similar challenges.

5.3.4 Significance of a confidential customer relation

Sales representants

The unanimous view of the interviewees was, that the confidential customer relationship is the key to success. They told that they build the trust by being open and honest, sharing the best practises with the customer and having regular meetings with prospects and customers, deliver what has been promised and discussing the possible problems openly. The behaviour towards the customer should always be similar. *“The customer will have the expectations that need to be met.”* The importance about company’s ability to keep promises was emphasized by the other Account Manager. “*Deliver what you promise. Bring up the possible problems openly, if you have those things and issues in your area and fix them.* In addition to above the Business Development Manager said that he has found it useful to demonstrate with his questions and presentations that he understands the prospect. *“I think this brings a lot of confidentiality to the customer, because they feel understood.”*

Management

The management saw confidentiality as a mandatory element in solution sales. *“Well I would say very significant as we are talking about solutions sales.”* Understanding the customer and having an honest and opening communication was mentioned: *“It is an open and transparent communications in terms of expectations on both sides.”* In addition to above the personal factor, the relationship between individuals representing different organizations was emphasised: *“Should be kind of personal on some level, building that type of a relationship would not happen overnight. It takes time so that they will learn that we are waking the talk.”* The third thing that the management representatives mentioned was that the company and its overall capabilities must be presented in a truthful way to build the confidentiality.

5.3.5 Other things to share

The other Account Manager found that the ongoing pandemic made the customer interaction more difficult. “*Now that all the meetings are digital. It’s difficult for me as a salesperson. Because when I have a personal contact and I can see my, my discussion partner at the other side of the table, live. I can see more an expression on humans faces.* The Business Development Manager emphasised that it is more important to listen to the customer than to present a technology solutions for them. *“it's better to know, what they need* *and what the problem of the clinic, of our customer or prospect is, than just go there and tell them how good a product or good solution is."*

6 Discussion

In this thesis project I focused on the salesmanship. In this thesis the salesmanship means both the skills needed for effective customer management and interaction and the ability to develop those skills. These skills cover sales call related investigation, planning, interacting and closing activities. In this chapter I compared the findings of the interviews with the theoretical framework presented in chapter 4 Obtaining customer's commitment.

6.1 Conclusions

To succeed in solution sales on regular basis the organisation must differentiate itself from the competition. As I mentioned in Chapter 1 Introduction, the ability to help people to understand why they need your help is a part of a successful sales process. This means that the customer is always in the center of the sales project. During the sales calls the sales representative's focus must be on the customer's challenges, needs and plans. In solution sales the entity is more than just a onetime investment, the buyer commits to co-operate a longer time with the seller instead of a one-time investment. There for, the buyers are looking for a partner or even an advisor instead of a vendor. The four important dimensions, that form the customer centric sales approach are mandatory parts of solution salesmanship in present times. A sales representative must master these dimensions in order to succeed with solution sales calls.

- Solution Salesmanship includes ability to
    - **Build relationships**, that are needed for being able to investigate prospects status, challenges and needs (Preliminaries).
    - **Interact with the prospect** to understand the relevance of the identified challenges to the prospect (Investigate).
    - **Develop the value proposition** with the customer, on relevant strengths to proof the organisations capabilities (Proof capability).
    - **Engage the prospect** to convert them to active partner (Obtain commitment).

Ascom's sales process does not identify the essence of the salesmanship. It does not support the sales act. It purely focuses on the phases, the roles and responsibilities, the governance practice, the templates and reviews and the approvals needed during the process. Because the process totally lacks the needed salesmanship dimension, I will not explain the lack of salesmanship concept in every sub-chapter below.

In the interviews conducted the Ascom's sales representatives who have a heterogenic background, told that they consider that they have learned the necessary sales skills they need in their current position. They mostly referred the interaction with the customers and colleagues that they have had in the sales related situations. Ascom's management representatives felt that having healthcare expertise or even training is essential.

The interviews proof that the importance of the salesmanship has not been fully understood in Ascom. None of the interviews did not mention any handicaps or development needs they had noticed in their own or in their teams' sales skills.

6.1.1 Building the relationship (preliminaries)

Based on the interviews conducted some of the Ascom's sales representatives meet the customers / prospects with certain interval. An some of them meet the prospects when they hear or notice, that the prospect is planning to purchase something new or has a new development project where Ascom's solutions could provide additional value. The management emphasised the importance of keeping touch with the existing customers and network. There seemed to be many different approaches and variation of practices used in different countries and business units. Instead of Ascom way there seemed to be individual ways that each employee used. Based on above the customers are met every now and then based on the individual approach of the sales representative. But is this the right way:

- To build trust?
- To develop customer centric value focused relationship that is needed for solution sales?
- To proof the prospect, that the sales representative understands the challenges?
- To tell about Ascom's technology and expertise that can be used for solving the challenges?

The customers value authentic relationship, that is based on transparency, competence, credibility, and trust more than a low price. The development of customer centric value focused relationship is a long-term work, that require constant presence of a seller even if the customer is not actively buying. During these meetings seller proofs, that he understands the customers processes, the issues that the prospect is facing and their relevance for the prospect's operations. Only when the seller has presented, that he understands the content and even the context, the customer starts to believe in the seller's ability to bring additional value for them. While building the relationship the seller and the customer get to know each other, not only as professionals but also as people. The comprehensive trust requires that the buyer knows the seller as an individual persona, not only as company representative. When there is a trustful relationship in place, the seller will get access to the data that is needed for bringing additional value to the buyer. In the most cases customers will not provide any important data for sellers they do not trust. In addition to above trust engages the customer to the sales representant and to the company he represents.

6.1.2 Interacting with the prospect (investigate)

In the interviews Ascom's sales representatives told that they enhance the interaction by defining the goal of a sales call in co-operation with the prospect's point of contact. In this interaction sales representatives ask prospect's expectations and requirements regarding the meeting. The prospect's requirements shall be included to the agenda of the meeting. During meetings the sales representatives use the following formula. "*Ask a question, listen to the answer, ask the necessary clarifying question, document - repeat*." As the Business Development Manager interviewed said. *"It's better to know, what they need and what the problem of the clinic, of our customer or prospect is, than just go there and tell them how good a product or good solution is."* In addition to this they try to verify the prospect's engagement by delivering the minutes of the meeting for the prospect and by conducting a follow up call. According to management representatives Ascom's sales representative must focus on three things related to sales calls. Firstly, they have to understand what the prospect is expecting from the meeting. Secondly, they must have a clear personal goal defined for the meeting. Thirdly, they must listen to the prospect carefully to learn more about the them and the challenges they have identified during the meeting.

According to the answers of the interviewees, they ask a lot of questions from the customers during the sales calls. They also seem to include customers' requirements to the agenda. It is also clear that they focus on learning more about the customer and customers' needs during the sales calls. But does the used approach:

- Help to clarify, if the challenge is a relevant for a customer? (focus)
- Enable the customer to understand, why Ascom would be able to help with the challenges that are relevant for them?

The second necessity is the ability to help people to understand why they need your help. If the prospects do not know who you are and why you could help, the sales cannot be conducted in a successful manner. In solution sales the amount of decision makers at prospect end is proximately 6,8 per case. Each decision maker represents a different buying persona. Each buying persona must be helped to understand the need and the added value proposed on their own terms. It is also sensible to utilize the previous learnings about similar sales calls throughout the sales call starting from the planning phase. This approach verifies, that the sales activities are aligned with company's the information-based sales process and practices.

6.1.3 Developing the value proposal (proof capability)

According the interviewees, the ultimate goal of the sales calls is to ensure, that Ascom and the prospect met interpret the things discussed and planned in the same way. The sales representatives plan the questions and presentation in advance in a way that they will meet the prospect's needs. The discussion will be guided to the direction that fulfils the customer's requirements and covers all the planned areas ("*my ten points*"). The questions that arise during the meeting shall be answered either immediately verbally or later in written. The Business Development Director underlined the importance of focusing on Ascom's ability to solve prospect's challenges and on proving this by sharing information about customers who have used Ascom's solutions to address similar challenges.

The focus is in the prospect's challenges. This is verified with the planned manuscript for the meeting. That is used for getting more information about the challenge. Ascom's capability is presented with reference customers, that are using Ascom's solution for tackling similar challenges. Most certainly the focus is clear and the potentiality of the Ascom's technology and expertise will be presented. But:

- Is this the way a planning partner operates?
- Where is the co-creation phase?

When a trustful relationship has been built and the prospect has shared the information about their challenges and plans with the sales representative. The seller can proof that in addition to understanding the challenges and needs the company has the capability, the expertise and the solutions needed for solving the challenges. To initiate the prospect's commitment, it is sensible co-create the value proposing demo or presentation with representants from the prospect organisation. The collaborative approach provides a possibility to further develop and investigate the customer's needs. The phrase "Seeing is believing" phrase applies also in sales.

6.1.4 Obtaining the commitment (closing)

The Ascom sales representatives and management representatives explained in the interview that it is always necessary to treat the customer in a way the, customer is expecting. The way the customers is treated will impact to confidentiality of relationship. In order to provide value to the prospect, the seller must keep the promises that have been given for the customer. The phrases "*Deliver what you promise.*" and *"walking the talk"* were mentioned in the interviews when confidentiality was discussed. The interviewees considered that it is important to define a common goal for each sales call and discuss that in advance with the prospect. It was stated that confidentiality is a mandatory building block. In addition, understanding the customer and having the honest and open communication with them. They considered also that the personal people to people relationship is important. Confidentiality and bi-directional trust are keys for building all kind of relationships in life. The approach the interviewees told about is the one needed for developing confidential relationships. But will it:

- Help the prospect to realise that the challenge discussed is larger than the cost of solving it?

When the implicit needs have been developed to explicit ones in collaboration with the prospect, the prospect has been engaged. At this point it is important to ensure if the problem is that acute and serious for a buyer that an investment is considered necessary. The explicit needs the buyer indicates are buying signals that obtain buyers commitment. Based on the interviews, Ascom's sales representatives put the prospect's needs in the center, but none of the interviewees explained how those needs are or should be further developed during the sales call and the follow up phase.

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6.2 Areas of further research

The sales act is a multi-layer process. In my thesis I brought up four stages that are included to sales act itself. These four dimensions must be considered in every sales call. The idea of my thesis work was to focus to the art of the solution salesmanship that is built on following four abilities:

- Ability to build a confidential relationship with the customer.
- Ability to interact with a customer and get more information from them.
- Ability to co-create a value proposal with customer and
- Ability to engage a prospect to active partner that consult the sales representative when new needs arise.

Due to the extent of the subject investigated I'm able only to point out the top of an iceberg regarding the salesmanship in this thesis. The diversity of interactions involved in solution sales, prevented me to comprehensively describe all four stages of a sales call. It would be intriguing to investigate these four stages in a more detailed manner. In my mind it would make sense to research in a holistic manner, what is the role of each stage in the big picture. In this thesis project I underlined the need to base the customer relationship on confidentiality and mutual trust. But that is just the starting point for a functional customer relationship. In addition to trust, sales representatives must understand the relevance of the challenges the prospect implies and proof to the prospect that he is able to tackle the relevant challenges and bring additional value to them. The third dimension that could be investigated in the future related to customer engagement is the building of a long-term partnership focused relationship.

Of course, with the timetable and resources allowed, it would also be interesting to see if the findings I have made can be generalized to other companies that sell solutions. A natural starting point could be the other companies that are focusing on healthcare domain.

6.3 Personal Reflections

Selecting the topic for my thesis was easy. The sales act and the salesmanship have interested me throughout my sales career. Before entering to sales role, I considered salesmen in a very stereotypic manner as manipulative, constantly talking, promises giving individuals who did not really listened or at least understood the customer. As my career moves indicate, I have turned my coat. This leap to the “dark side” occurred when I understood that every single employee of the company is selling. I also realized that I had conducted solutions sales in every single position I had held. As indicated in the theoretical framework a modern successful solution sales representative keeps the customer and their problems in the center. According to my understanding this means that trust and customer confidentiality are the cornerstones of sales. Only when these cornerstones are in place, can a sales representative help potential customers understand, why they need his or her help. This approach is essential for standing out from the competition.

The idea was to focus to sales calls and the salesmanship of Ascom’s sales representatives in order to evaluate how they engage the customer. The goal of each sales call is to take a step that takes sales representative nearer to closing a sale. In order to close sales, seller must be able to engage a prospect. Trust and interactions are needed to convince the prospect that the sales representative and the organisation, he represents can be the right planning partner or even an advisor for them. To prove that, a sales representative must be able to present that he knows how to tackle the challenges the prospect has, in a way that clear measurable benefits will appear. This is always conducted by utilising a same cycle that includes small talk, information digging, proofing the capability and closing in all sales calls. Because selection of a prospect, investigation of a prospect and the preparation to a sales call are steps needed for putting the customer in the center, I ended up covering also those phases with the interviews.

In the beginning of the interviews, I emphasised that the focus of them were a to investigate how the customer’s commitment is obtained during a sales call. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the interviewees did not see the big picture related to the interview. I feel that they saw every question as an independent topic instead of a part of a very same process. On the other hand, the answers can also reflect the interviewees current level of salesmanship. Hindsight thinking, I should have had narrower scope, focusing purely on the sales call itself and the actions a sales representative takes in the calls to obtain prospects commitment. Another interesting finding was related to fact that there seems not to be an Ascom way to sell solutions. Naturally all interviews have a customer focus, but the planning and implementation of the sales calls variated widely. In any case, management emphasized the importance of keeping in touch with existing customers and leveraging the networks of both sales representatives and their customers. The third major finding was related to the fact that, none of the interviews identified any solution salesmanship related skills. Neither did they mention any handicaps or development needs they had noticed in their own or in sales team’s skill set.

With the careful planning, the learnings from the Thesis Planning curse, the expertise and support from my thesis Advisor, I managed to keep the scope of the thesis on manageable level. In addition to that I was able to avoid the anticipated risks related of this project totally. I consider that the outcomes of the thesis, that met my expectations, are useful for both Ascom and myself. Writing of the thesis was a useful learning experience. It helped me to expand my understanding of solution salesmanship and increased my enthusiasm to investigate the area in a more comprehensive manner.

I naturally tried to approach the topic objectively to ensure the reliability and validity of the thesis. However, the experiences I have gained, in my current position as Business Development Manager at Ascom Oy might have impacted to the interpretation of my findings.

I collected the things, that are needed in solution sales call for obtaining customer’s commitment to the Solution sales playbook. The playbook aims to tackle the shortcomings of Ascom’s current sales practice. In the playbook I tried to combine both the ideas of modern customer driven solution sales and Ascom’s phase review discipline -oriented sales process. I did not define a detailed "cookbook" for sales calls. The playbook lists the things that should be considered, when planning and conducting sales calls that aim to obtain customer's commitment. The things presented are based on the theoretical framework presented in chapter 4 Obtaining customer’s commitment.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions of Ascom's sales representative interview

Open

"This interview is related to my bachelor's thesis for the Degree Program in International Business at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. The scope of the thesis is to define a sales practice that obtains customer commitment in every sales call. The interview shall be recorded. Are you ready for the interview?"

Warmup

1) Please tell me your name and position
2) Can you describe you role at Ascom
3) How have you learned and developed the expertise and skills you need in your current role?

Interview

4) How do you choose a prospect to meet?
    a) On what information the selection is based?

5) How do you prepare to a customer meeting?
    a) When will the preparation take place?
    b) What kind of things vary in the preparation depending who you meet?

6) How do you define a goal for a meeting?
    a) Why do you do it that way?

7) How do you ensure that you will be able to meet the goal that you have set?
    a) Before the meeting
    b) During the meeting
    c) After the meeting

8) What is the significance of the confidential customer relation?
    a) How do you build trust?

Closing

9) Is there anything else that comes to your mind regarding the topic you would possibly like to share?

"Thank you for your time, insights and opinions. In case you have any questions or ideas regarding the topic do not hesitate to contact me."

Appendix 2. Interview questions of Ascom's management representative interview

Open

"This interview is related to my bachelor's thesis for the Degree Program in International Business at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. The scope of the thesis is to define a sales practice that obtains customer commitment in every sales call. The interview shall be recorded. Are you ready for the interview?"

Warmup

1) Please tell me your name and position
   2) Can you describe you role at Ascom
   3) How according to your knowledge and current understanding and current knowledge, how have the team members learned and developed the skills and expertise they need in their daily practice?

Interview

4) How do the sales managers choose the prospects they meet?
   a) On what information the selection is based?

5) How according to your understanding do the sales represents prepare to customer meetings?
   a) When will the preparation take place?
   b) What kind of things vary in the preparation depending who you meet?

6) How to you expect the sales reps to define a goal for each meeting?
   a) Why do you do it that way?

7) How should the sales representatives ensure that they meet the goal they have set for the meeting?
   a) Before the meeting
   b) During the meeting
   c) After the meeting

8) According to your understanding what is the significance of confidential customer relationship within solution sales in the business area where we are?
   a) How do you build trust?

Closing

9) Is there anything else that comes to your mind regarding the topic you would possibly like to share?

"Thank you for your time, insights and opinions. In case you have any questions or ideas regarding the topic do not hesitate to contact me."

Appendix 3. Cover letter for the interviewees

Dear Colleague,

I'm contacting you, related to my Bachelor's thesis for the Degree Program in International Business at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. The scope of the thesis is to define a sales practice that obtains customer commitment in every sales call.

The purpose of this interview is to identify the sales approach, skills and tactics that Ascom Key Account Managers utilizes in their sales calls. The inputs of the interviews are used for defining a solution sales playbook

The interview will take approximately 15 minutes. And it will be conducted with MS Teams. The interview questions are attached to this message. With your permission the interview is recorded. The interview records and the collected data will be handled with confidentiality.

Please inform me your availability. In case of any questions arise, contact undersigned. (markku.sani@myy.haaga-helia.fi)

Thank you for your participation!

- Markku

Appendix 4. Solution sales playbook

The Solutions sales playbook is attached in Ascom look and feel on the following pages of the thesis.

SOLUTION SALES PLAYBOOK

18.05.2021

MARKKU SANI

Content

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Step 2 Plan 2
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Solution Sales Call

Solution sales is a customer centric, focused process that is based on the company's sales strategy. During the sales calls the focus is on the prospects' challenges, needs and plans. It is essential that the sales representative proofs, that he understands the prospects processes, the issues that a prospect is facing and their relevance for the prospect's operations. In addition to above one must proof that he is able to provide additional value to prospect challenges by co-creating and collaborating.

Step 1 Prepare

- Make sure you have a comprehensive understanding of company's sales strategy and its focus and limitations.
- Make sure you understand the general needs of the customer target group and the prevailing competitive situation.
- Identify prospects with the challenges the company's sales strategy aims to tackle.
- Select potential customers.
- Conduct a research to understand prospect's situation.
    - What is happening?
    - Who is who?
- Select the first contact.
- Ensure that the collected information is documented to CRM.

Step 2 Plan

- Plan the sales call based on the company's sales strategy, focus and the information about the prospect.
    - Consult the business and process experts.
- Define a GOAL /FOCUS
- Document the plan into CRM.

Step 3 Sales call

- Contact the selected first contact and agree a sales call / meeting.
- Apply SPIN stages. Document everything. Listen to the prospect!
    - PRELIMINARIES
        - Small talk cover generally both personal and business topics shortly.

- INVESTIGATION
  - Verify that the understanding about the prospect's organisation, and the stakeholders regarding the planned topic are correct.
  - Discuss the possible development plans prospect has.
  - Further develop the implicit needs that arise during the conversation.
  - Document everything
- PROOFING THE CAPABILITY
  - Demonstrate Ascom's capability by
    - Understanding the situation and the challenges related to it.
      - Ask more specific questions about the topics that arise.
    - Sharing information about the reference sites, where Ascom's expertise and technology has be used for solving similar challenges.
    - Present the solution.
      - Presentation or demo
- OBTAIN THE COMMITMENT
  - When explicit challenges that are relevant to prospect exist,
    - Discuss and agree how to proceed with the dialog.
      - Expand the conversation to cover other individuals and stakeholders or topic area experts on customer side.
      - Present live demo
      - Arrange reference site visit
    - Agree clear action points with target dates.
  - When explicit challenges do not exit
    - Investigate the root cause of the situation.
      - Close the dialog.
      - Document
      - Follow up the prospect.
        - Re-contact the prospect when situation changes.

Step 4 Follow Up

- Consult experts regarding the questions that were not answered during the meeting. Deliver the answers to prospect in written with the meeting minutes.
- Sent the meeting minutes that contain the agreed action points to prospects' representatives that participated the meeting in two days.
- Ensure that the prospect related info is updated to CRM.
- Call the first point of contact after few days. Request feedback about the meeting and check if new questions have arisen.
- Set the date for the agreed next appointment.

Repeat the same sequence and utilize the information that has been gathered in previous sales calls.

ascom

Customer Engagement Process Diagram

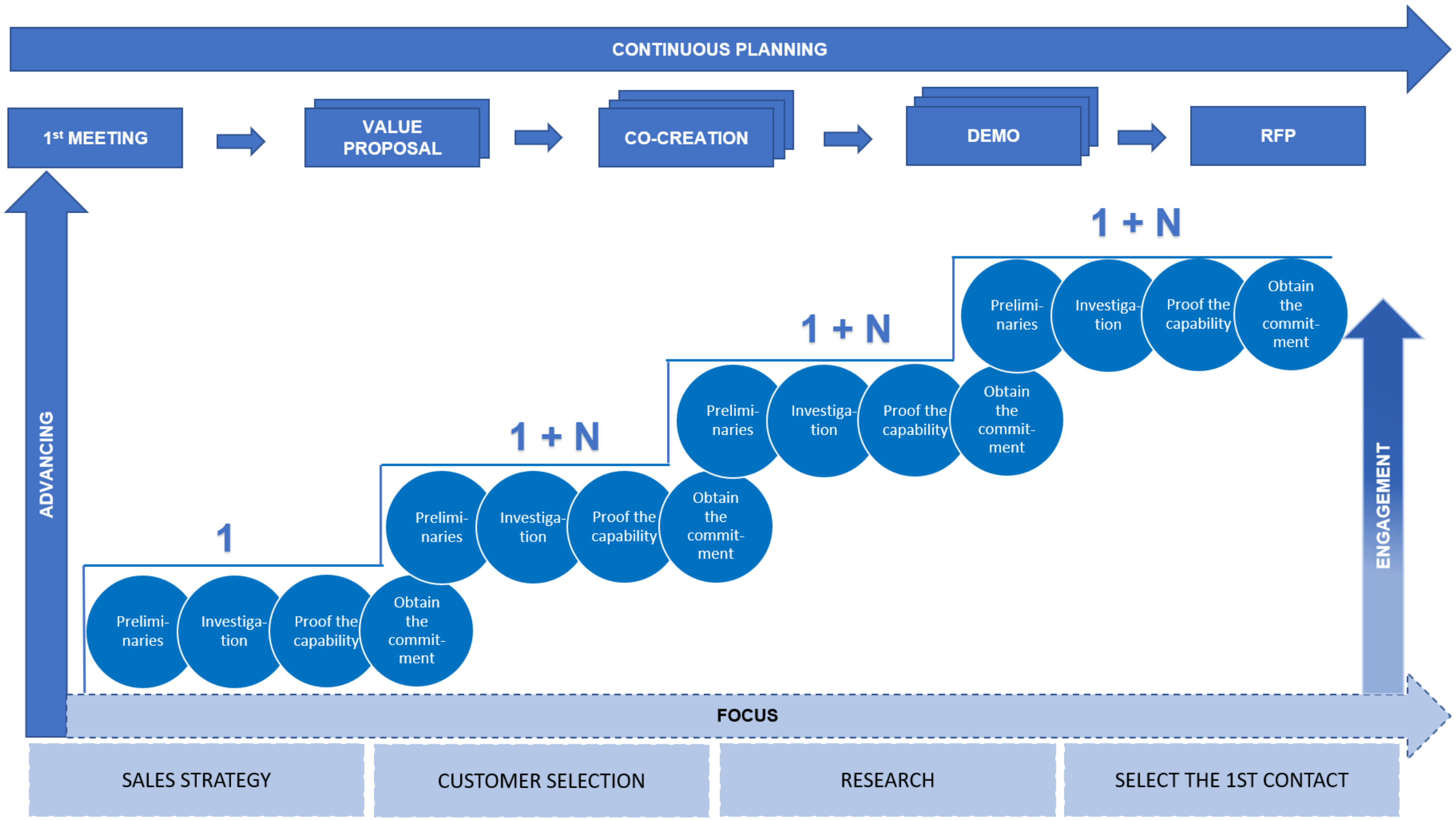

Figure 1. Solution sales process model. The sales calls are parts in an information-based process where advancing is based on the understating of the relevance of the prospect's explicit challenges.