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DOI

[10.1080/08853134.2022.2082451](https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2022.2082451)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management

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Citation for published version (APA):

Klarmann, M., & Wouters, M. (2023). Benefits, discounts, features, and value as communication foci in selling: Exploring concepts, drivers, and outcomes. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 43(1), 46-64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2022.2082451>

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To cite this article: Martin Klarmann & Marc Wouters (2023) Benefits, discounts, features, and value as communication foci in selling: Exploring concepts, drivers, and outcomes, Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 43:1, 46-64, DOI: [10.1080/08853134.2022.2082451](https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2022.2082451)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2022.2082451>



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Benefits, discounts, features, and value as communication foci in selling: Exploring concepts, drivers, and outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Customers in business markets face difficult choice problems. Depending on the customer's choice construal, in terms of the customer's criteria and the tradeoffs the customer wants to make, different kinds of information are relevant and influential. We conceptualize four communication foci in B2B selling, which differ in terms of the kinds of information that is communicated during sales interactions with customers: value communication, benefit communication, feature communication, and discount communication. Drawing on survey data from a sample of 226 B2B salespeople, we empirically investigate these constructs and specifically test for their distinctiveness. Finally, in an exploratory analysis, we identify potential drivers, outcomes, and moderators (i.e., enablers) of these communication foci. The four communication foci are driven by substantially different sets of drivers, indicating that they are employed in different settings. We find no communication focus is clearly directly related to sales performance. Instead, the effectiveness of a communication focus is likely to depend on the situation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 October 2020
Accepted 23 May 2022

KEYWORDS

Business-to-business marketing; sales interactions; personal selling; rational influence tactics; information relevance; choice construal; value-based selling

A central characteristic of sales interactions in business markets is the exchange of information. Acting as the informational bridge between the seller and buyer organizations, salespeople are knowledge brokers (Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal 2011) who have networks to collect and deliver information in both their own organization (Claro and Ramos 2018; Menguc, Auh, and Kim 2011) and the buyer organization (Blocker et al. 2012). Salespeople in business markets transfer information about customers' problems and priorities, products and services the supplier may provide to address these, and the commercial, operational, and technical context for these products and services (Homburg, Wieseke, and Bornemann 2009).

While the transfer of information happens often in conversations with customers (Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal 2011), we know little about the nature of the information that is communicated during sales interactions (Evans et al. 2012). Research has long advanced the idea that sales interactions may focus on discounts, features, benefits, and/or value of the supplier's offering (Dwyer, Hill, and Martin 2000; Mullins, Menguc, and Panagopoulos 2020) and those approaches play an exceptionally important role for practitioners, for example, in guidelines for best practices, blogs, or textbooks (Anderson and Narus 2004; Homburg, Schäfer, and Schneider 2012; Jobber and Lancaster 2015).¹ Such suggestions have practical merits and are often based on examples of actual company practices, but they are often universally stated (such as a suggested superiority of benefit communication over feature communication) and do not rest on more rigorous evidence.

However, established conceptualizations and scales for communication foci in selling are still lacking, inhibiting research on these foci.² With value selling as the exception, almost no research has examined communication foci in selling, or the research does not address business markets (Deleersnyder and Koll 2012). We contribute to the literature by conceptualizing four important communication foci in B2B selling, developing scales for them, and testing determinants and the performance outcome. Notably, rather than relating to overall selling approaches, these foci relate to information that is most prominently communicated during the sales interaction with the customer. Drawing on construal level theory (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007), we suggest the relevance of these different communication foci depends on how the customer mentally thinks about the choice in terms of criteria and tradeoffs (Cho, Khan, and Dhar 2013; Khan, Zhu, and Kalra 2011).

Overall, this study contributes to research on selling by providing a comparative overview of salesperson communication focus in selling. First, we conceptualize four new constructs based on the communication focus in selling: benefit communication in selling, discount communication in selling, feature communication in selling, and value communication in selling. We thereby respond to calls to expand the understanding of the nature of buyer-seller interactions (Evans et al. 2012) and specifically to the idea that sales behavior should be investigated at the level of specific influence tactics. Evans et al. (2012) distinguish three categories of seller influence tactics, namely rational influence tactics, emotional/relational influence tactics, and coercive influence

tactics. We focus on one of these categories and conceptualize the four communication foci in selling as specific forms of rational influence tactics.

Second, we empirically investigate these constructs, using data from a sample of 226 B2B salespeople. Hence, our study is also a response to recent calls for more nuanced measures in sales management (e.g., Alavi, Habel, and Linsenmayer 2019; Hall and Lee 2019). The results provide support for the validity of the newly developed measures of the sales foci in several ways. When we compare three measurement models that focus on the links between the four constructs, our data indicate that these four constructs measure distinct phenomena that cannot be structured in a hierarchy or aggregated to broader conversation foci. Moreover, the results suggest that these communication foci more strongly differentiate selling situations than the established construct of customer orientation, supporting that these four communication foci capture an intriguing new phenomenon. Finally, we investigate four groups of constructs as potential drivers of these communication foci: (1) customer information needs, (2) salesperson information exchange with customers, (3) salesperson cross-functional communication with other departments of the salesperson's firm, and (4) two other salesperson communication behaviors—customer orientation and adaptive selling. The results provide support for our measures of the communication foci, because these are driven by different sets of drivers, supporting the expectation that they are used in different settings.

Third, in an exploratory analysis we look at outcomes of the four communication foci in selling, whereby we consider self-reported sales performance. We do not find simple effects of communication foci on sales performance. Instead, we expect contingency effects (and find some support for this with regard to value communication). Value communication in selling is not a “cure all” approach for increasing salesperson performance.

Communication foci in selling

Theoretical background

An informational perspective on sales interactions places information relevance at the center (Mishra, Umesh, and Stem 1993; West, Wilkin, and Bentley 2004). When choosing which market offering to select, customers face difficult multi-attribute decision problems, especially in a high-tech environment (Narasimhan, Talluri, and Mahapatra 2006). Salespeople can be persuasive by providing rational arguments the customer finds helpful for decision-making, because these arguments fit their informational challenge. Rational arguments involve information exchange and consist of “a communication process that the seller uses to educate the buyer about products and services he has to offer, make product demonstrations, and gain information from the buyer about any needs or problems they or their company are experiencing” (Evans et al. 2012, 95). Rational arguments also extend to making recommendations that “explain the benefits of a purchase. This may include comparisons with

competitors' products or services, conducting cost-benefit analyses, overcoming buyer objections, etc.” (Evans et al. 2012, 95). To influence the customer, these arguments should offer information the customer finds helpful (West, Wilkin, and Bentley 2004).

The idea of information relevance provides a motivation for investigating various communication foci. Research drawing on construal level theory (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007) demonstrated how customers construct their choice problems in diverse ways, regarding the criteria they consider, how they aggregate criteria into broader categories, and how they make tradeoffs (Cho, Khan, and Dhar 2013; Khan, Zhu, and Kalra 2011). The information salespeople communicate during sales interactions should fit the customer's choice construal in terms of the customer's criteria and thinking regarding tradeoffs. For example, a focus on features may help the customer understand in detail how the offering could work as part of various production and logistics processes; a focus on price may help the customer decide between more or less identical offerings; focusing on benefits may help the customer compare dissimilar offerings by clarifying how features provide various advantages and disadvantages. A focus on monetary value could be particularly helpful by quantifying tradeoffs in financial terms.

However, value information in monetary terms may not be the most relevant information from the customer's perspective. People may want to think about choices at different levels of abstraction, to consider criteria in more or less detail, and to make tradeoffs more or less explicitly (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). Customer value in monetary terms provides a more abstract and less detailed kind of information that implicitly incorporates many compensatory tradeoffs. This informational approach would be relevant for customers who want to simplify a complex choice problem that involves attributes with different units of measurement by making these commensurable. Customers who do not want to look at more detailed, specific issues may find the financial common unit of measurement particularly compelling in business markets (Anderson, Narus, and van Rossum 2006). On the other hand, customers may want to engage with the choice in more specific, concrete terms (e.g., features). For example, technology may be a key feature that customers want to understand in detail and consider separately. Finally, even if the overall financial impact is the most important consideration, customers may prefer to quantify tradeoffs themselves based on various kinds of informational inputs from a supplier—for example, whether higher performance on particular technical specifications outweighs an estimated higher investment.

Four communication foci: benefits, discounts, features, and value

Against the background of this theoretical idea that salespeople's interactions with customers are information exchanges and that salesperson persuasiveness will depend on the relevance of the information the salesperson conveys, we investigate four communication foci that scholars (Dwyer, Hill, and Martin 2000; Mullins, Menguc, and Panagopoulos 2020)

and managers claim to be important, but which prior research has mostly neglected so far: benefits, discounts, features, and value. These communication foci are specific forms of rational influence tactics (Evans et al. 2012). These particular tactics imply that the supplier aims to persuade the buyer with rational arguments, and this persuasion approach includes providing information about products and services, and explaining why a purchase is in the buyer's own best interest. These rational arguments can be made in terms of various kinds of information, as represented by the communication foci constructs.

Drawing on prior conceptualizations (Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann 2011a; Jobber and Lancaster 2015), for each communication focus we include four stages of communicating with the customer: developing a proposal, presenting the offering to the prospective customer, discussing the offering with the prospective customer, and closing the sales encounter. These stages align with traditional steps of selling (Dubinsky 1981) and with the evolved selling steps (Moncrief and Marshall 2005),³ which were developed in response to factors such as information technology and suppliers seeking long-term relationships with customers (Haas, Snehota, and Corsaro 2012; Hartmann, Wieland, and Vargo 2018; Colm, Ordanini, and Bornemann 2020). Our stages are more specific and correspond to Moncrief and Marshall's more broadly described steps 2, 4, 5, and 6. We exclude Moncrief and Marshall's steps 1, 3, and 7.⁴

Benefit communication in selling

We define benefit communication in selling as the extent to which the salesperson communicates information about how a product satisfies the needs of the customer (e.g., Homburg, Schäfer, and Schneider 2012). The information focuses on the offering from the customer's perspective and addresses how well the offering performs in the customer's context (such as how processes become more efficient or faster). Benefit communication in selling emphasizes how the offering's features (e.g., technical characteristics) create utility by producing various advantages for the customer, using their language and units of measurement. For example, the supplier could communicate how its offering would enable the customer to reduce defects in production, decrease errors made by operators, or shorten the lead time of particular processes. Benefit communication does not preclude talking about financial benefits, but in contrast to value communication in selling, it does not involve any significant efforts to quantify benefits and sacrifices into a monetary unit. The "bottom line" could be stated as, "With this machine, your production process will have yyy units fewer with defects."

As a concept, benefit communication in selling is related to the established construct of salesperson customer orientation, which is typically described as comprising behaviors aimed at selling those products that satisfy a customers' need (e.g., Saxe and Weitz 1982). In line with this understanding, focusing on how an offering satisfies the needs of the customer (i.e., employing benefit communication) could be viewed as a customer-oriented behavior.

Feature communication in selling

Also called "character selling," feature communication in selling is defined as the extent to which the salesperson communicates information about the product's superior technical characteristics (Homburg, Schäfer, and Schneider 2012). Throughout, the salesperson emphasizes the offering's technological capabilities—for example, with technical jargon and units of measurement to describe the offering, accounts of results achieved on specialized technical tests, technical standards the offering complies with, and technical certifications the offering has obtained. The bottom line could be, "This is an innovative and technologically advanced machine, with a temperature-controlled range of xxx Kelvin."

Discount communication in selling

We define discount communication in selling as the extent to which the salesperson communicates information about the low sales price. The salesperson provides both quantitative and qualitative information about the purchase price and related conditions of the offering, emphasizing how the purchase price is favorable compared to other offerings and minimizes the burden on the customer's purchasing and capital investment budgets. The salesperson ignores tradeoffs between the purchase price and offering features and emphasizes that the supplier's price is quite low. Discount communication is relevant because purchasing managers often use purchase price as the key element for evaluating market offerings (Anderson, Thomson, and Wynstra 2000), creating problems for a supplier selling higher price–higher value offerings (Anderson and Wynstra 2010). The bottom line could be stated as, "The competitive purchase price of qqq Euro reduces the burden on your CAPEX budget."

Value communication in selling

We build on the research on value-based selling (Ballantyne et al. 2011; Hohenschwert 2012; Payne, Frow, and Eggert 2017; Terho et al. 2012; 2015; 2017; Töytäri, Rajala, and Alejandro 2015; Töytäri, Keränen, and Rajala 2017). Terho et al. (2012; 2015) define value-based selling as "the degree to which the salesperson works with the customer to craft a market offering in such a way that benefits are translated into monetary terms, based on an in-depth understanding of the customer's business model, thereby convincingly demonstrating their contribution to customers' profitability" (Terho et al. 2012, 178). Thus, a central characteristic of value-based selling is the expression of customer value in financial terms from the perspective of the customer. While previous research has looked at performance outcomes of value-based selling (Jong, Zacharias, and Nijssen 2020; Hinterhuber 2017; Mullins, Menguc, and Panagopoulos 2020; Terho et al. 2015; 2017) and organizational implementation (Terho et al. 2017; Töytäri, Keränen, and Rajala 2017; Töytäri, Rajala, and Alejandro 2015; Töytäri and Rajala 2015; Pöyry, Parvinen, and Martens 2021), our study adopts a comparative perspective. We define value communication in selling as the extent to which the salesperson communicates the economic worth of the offering for the customer.

The conceptualization of value communication in selling is subject to three nuances. First, we include the purchase price the customer pays in customer value, so this represents a “net” effect for the customer after subtracting the purchase price (Cannon and Homburg 2001; Lapierre 2000; Ulaga and Eggert 2006). Other authors explicitly separate purchase price from customer value (Anderson and Narus 1998; Anderson, Thomson, and Wynstra 2000; Anderson and Wynstra 2010). Second, customer value may not always be positive: the customer could be financially better off by not choosing this supplier offering. Value communication could also address such a situation and thereby support the customer’s decision-making. Third, if the salesperson knows or suspects which alternative offering(s) the customer is considering and has sufficient information about those, value communication in selling could focus on the *differential* value (Anderson and Narus 1998).

Conceptual framework

In our conceptual framework, depicted in Figure 1, we link the four communication foci to drivers and the outcome of sales performance (defined as “the financial result of a salesperson’s selling activities,” Homburg, Müller, and Klarman 2011a, p. 57). In selecting variables for understanding drivers of the communication foci, we adopt an information perspective on sales interactions. First, we look at the customer’s information needs based on what is offered and whether the exchange takes place in an established (vs. new) buyer-supplier relationship (e.g., Johnston and Lewin 1996). Second, acknowledging that salespeople are becoming boundary-spanners between organizations (e.g., Hartmann, Wieland, and Vargo 2018), we consider information exchange with customer purchasing, operations, finance, and R&D departments, as salespeople typically engage with a buying

center comprising individuals from different departments. Third, as salespeople increasingly rely on information and data from their networks within their firm to be successful (Storbacka, Polsa, and Sääksjärvi 2011; Üstüner and Iacobucci 2012), we look at salesperson cross-functional communication with other departments in the salesperson’s own firm, especially marketing, finance, operations, and R&D. Finally, we include established constructs relating to two key salesperson communication behaviors (e.g., Franke and Park 2006): customer orientation and adaptive selling. We do not hypothesize specific relationships between our constructs of interest but instead introduce the constructs while discussing their potential with regard to the information relevance of the communication foci.

We explore several roles of these variables, not only as drivers of the communication focus in selling, but also as moderators for the relationships between communication foci and salesperson performance. Based on the informational relevance argument, we propose that a supplier will try to consider which information is most helpful and relevant from the customer’s point of view. In other words, the supplier would try to understand the customer’s choice construal and adopt a fitting communication focus. In turn, the supplier’s provision of more relevant information, i.e., information that actually fits the customer’s choice construal, would lead to better salesperson performance. As a result, a variable that matters for the customer’s choice construal could be a driver of the communication focus in selling, because this variable influences the salesperson’s choice of a communication focus. But additionally, the same variable could be a moderator of the relationship between a communication focus and salesperson performance, because this variable matters for the effectiveness of the communication focus. For example, if the salesperson would anticipate that product customization matters for the customer’s choice

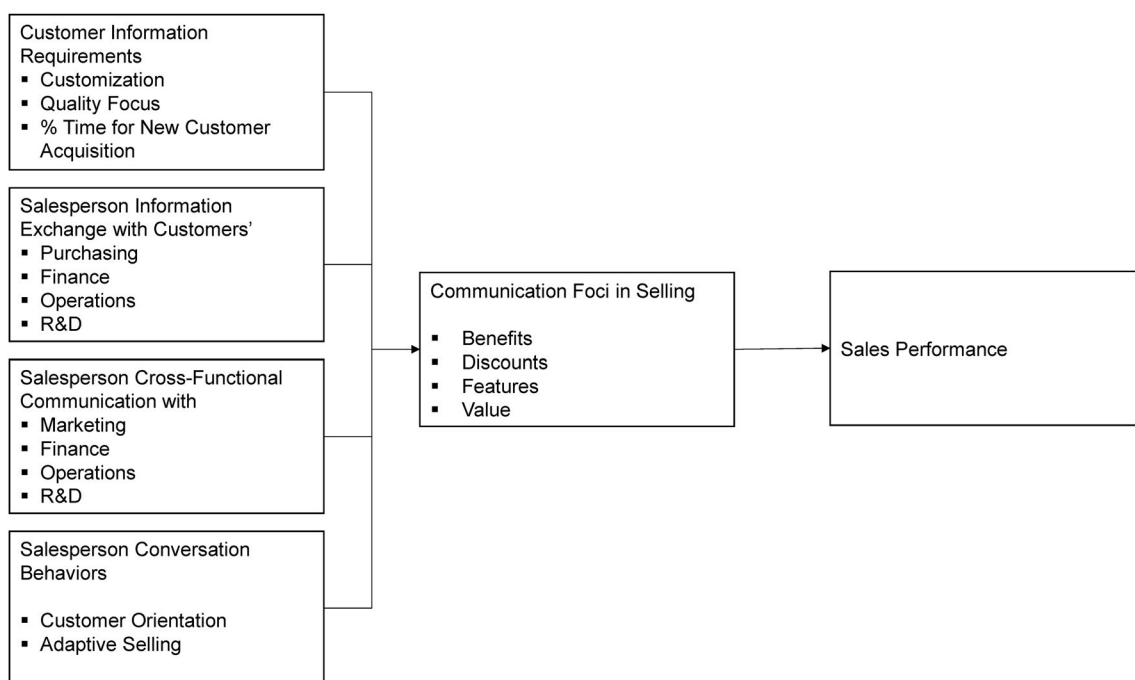


Figure 1. Framework of drivers and outcomes of communication foci in selling.

construal, product customization would influence the salesperson's choice for a particular communication focus, and product customization would influence the effectiveness of the chosen communication focus.

Customer information needs

The first group of constructs concerns how much and what kind of information a customer might need to understand the supplier's offering and to decide on the purchase. These are constructs regarding the level of product customization, the quality positioning of the supplier's products, and the familiarity of the supplier to the customers (new or existing customers).

Product customization

We define product customization as the extent to which the supplier adjusts a product and service for a particular customer. Product customization is based on Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann (2011b), who studied the interaction between customization (labeled individualization) and customer orientation. We intuitively expect that if the supplier offers more customization potential, the customer not only will have greater possibility to adjust and optimize the product, but also will encounter more difficulty in distinguishing product offerings and their quality (Homburg, Klarmann, and Schmitt 2010). Which information is most helpful depends on the customer's choice construal when evaluating customization options. Communication about customer value in monetary terms could support the customer's decision-making if the customer adopts a choice construal at an abstract level, wanting basically to understand how customization leads to overall financial outcomes. On the other hand, a customer might want to think about how to customize the product in less abstract terms and consider how specific features could be adjusted to a particular need they have. Or, a customer may want to consider how customization might provide specific benefits to them. Thus, depending on the customer's choice construal, customization may affect the relevance of the various communication foci in selling, making it an important construct to include.

Product quality focus

We define product quality focus as the extent to which a supplier strategically pursues a quality strategy as opposed to a cost-leadership strategy (e.g., Porter 2008). Notably, firms facing competitors from emerging markets that compete mostly on low prices often see value-based selling as a potential response. Focusing customers' attention on financial value will emphasize the mid- or long-term benefits products from established suppliers potentially offer. Hence, value communication is likely to be more helpful for customers if the supplier pursues a product quality focused strategy.

Salesperson time allocated to new customer acquisition

We define this as the amount of time a salesperson allocates to new customer acquisition compared to serving old

customers (e.g., Reinartz, Thomas, and Kumar 2005). In contrast to new customers, long-time customers have first-hand knowledge of a supplier's products and are most likely in a good position to assess the economic worth of a particular offer. Conversely, value communication might be used more by salespeople focusing on acquiring new customers, or it might be more effective for sales interactions with new customers. On the other hand, new customers need to become more familiar with the product and may want to consider it in terms of very concrete features, or to first understand the advantages and disadvantages of a product or supplier, before turning to a choice construal in terms of more abstract customer value. New customers may also want to think about price advantages of new suppliers or products. Thus, as new customers may construe their choice problems in various ways, making different communication foci relevant for them, we include the time a salesperson allocates to new customers as a variable in the conceptual framework.

Information exchange with customers

Of central importance are variables related to salespersons' gathering of information. Selling is increasingly understood as an interorganizational activity for developing solution offerings (Colm, Ordanini, and Bornemann 2020; Hartmann, Wieland, and Vargo 2018; Panagopoulos, Rapp, and Ogilvie 2017). Salespeople need to go "beyond customer articulated needs" (Terho et al. 2012, 179) and should be thoroughly familiar with the customer's value chain and its financial dimension. At least some of this information is situation-specific, each sales interaction will require information gathering. Furthermore, external and internal changes can make knowledge obsolete, sometimes quite rapidly (Flint, Woodruff, and Gardial 2002), and knowledge is dispersed across the supplier and the customer and departments within them (Krush, Sohi, and Saini 2015).

We define information exchange with the customer as the extent of the salesperson's interaction with people working in various departments of the customer's organization. We include four constructs in our model, each of which refers to information exchange with another customer department, namely purchasing, finance, operations, and R&D. We expect these constructs to be associated in particular with a value communication focus, as this focus requires extensive information gathering efforts of the salesperson (Anderson, Narus, and van Rossum 2006). Moreover, the importance of supplier-customer interaction suggests these constructs could be moderators of the communication focus-salesperson performance relationship. Networking with customers and within the salesperson's own organization are crucial abilities for effective value-based selling (Terho et al. 2017). Other prior studies, too, provide support for the importance of supplier-customer interaction. A meta-analysis revealed that communication (defined as the amount, frequency, and quality of information shared) had almost the greatest positive influence (after seller expertise) on customer-supplier relationships in terms of commitment,

trust, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality (Palmatier et al. 2006). Case studies of eight companies demonstrated that the creation of a customer value proposition typically involved numerous interactions to communicate the value proposition to customers or co-create it with them (Skälén et al. 2015). Joint decision-making and problem-solving activities by suppliers and customers were associated with greater customer value (Homburg et al. 2005), and studies of customer participation in the NPD process provide support for the importance of supplier-customer interaction (Fang, Palmatier, and Evans 2008).

Salesperson cross-functional communication

We define cross-functional communication as the extent of the salesperson's interaction with people working in other departments of the supplier organization. This is based on the observation that "sales has changed from being an independent, isolated function with little cross-functional influence to becoming a pivotal and integrated cross-functional part of long-term customer management" (Storbacka, Polsa, and Sääksjärvi 2011, 35). Research in this domain has focused mostly on cross-functional communication between sales and marketing (Homburg, Jensen, and Krohmer 2008; Claro and Ramos 2018), but effective selling requires networking with many other departments in the firm as well (Üstüner and Iacobucci 2012). Therefore, we include four constructs in our model, each of which refers to information exchange with another supplier department, namely marketing, finance, operations, and R&D. To prepare for sales interactions, salespersons also gather information broadly within their own organization (Claro and Ramos 2018). For example, internal networking is crucial for value-based selling (Terho et al. 2017). Therefore, we consider the degree to which the salesperson can access other departments to get support, as these departments may possess additional knowledge about the supplier's market offering relevant to understanding its features, benefits, value, or price. Moreover, they may also have relevant knowledge about the customer's context. For example, colleagues in the finance department may have looked at a customer's financial situation for the purpose of establishing credit terms. Salespeople can tap into such sources of information in other departments in their own organization (Hinterhuber 2017). Research on functional roles (e.g., Nath and Bharadwaj 2020) also supports the idea that functions have different kinds of information, so salespeople need to interact with several functions to be able to communicate knowledgeably with the customer during a sales interaction.

Notably, we focus on information exchange between departments, which is a subset of the activities often subsumed under the broader concept of cross-functional integration that is typically studied in the context of new product development (Troy, Hirunyawipada, and Paswan 2008; Homburg et al. 2017). Our focus on communication and exchanging information is comparable to that of Luo, Slotegraaf, and Pan (2006, 72), who investigated "the ability

to assimilate and deploy market knowledge in lateral interactions among functional units."

Salesperson information behaviors

Lastly, we include two established salesperson constructs (and potential confounds) that are linked to what information salespeople convey: customer orientation and adaptive selling (e.g., Franke and Park 2006).

Customer orientation

We define customer orientation as "a set of behaviors indicating a high concern for customer interests and needs and ensuring long-term customer satisfaction" (Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann 2011b, 798). We are interested in customer orientation for two primary reasons. First, it is prominent in the sales literature (e.g., Franke and Park 2006; Langerak 2001), and ascertaining whether effects of value communication simply confound effects of customer orientation is important. Moreover, salesperson customer orientation may be positively associated with value-based selling (Terho et al. 2015; Mullins, Menguc, and Panagopoulos 2020). Second, from the perspective of information relevance, customer orientation could refer to greater attunement to how the customer wants to make the decision, which would encourage a salesperson with a higher customer orientation to take an appropriate communication focus. The more the salesperson is attuned to the customer, the more accurately he or she will anticipate the customer's choice construal.

Adaptive selling

Adaptive selling refers to the "altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986, 175). We include this construct because it is well-established in the sales literature and we want to rule out that a particular communication focus in selling is simply a confound. Specifically, adaptive selling implies changing the sales argumentation (Alavi, Habel, and Linsenmayer 2019) and thereby possibly the focus of the communication. Moreover, the idea of adapting sales behaviors during a customer interaction contrasts with maintaining a consistent focus that would be the most relevant for a particular customer's choice construal. This contrast between adaptation and focus makes this construct an interesting driver and moderator to include in the conceptual framework.

Data collection and sample

To validate our conceptualization of value communication in selling and the other selling communication foci, in the second half of 2013 we conducted an online survey among German B2B salespeople. We recruited participants using two commercial online panel providers. To form a target group, we selected individuals who met four requirements: (1) worked in a sales department, (2) had regular customer

contact, (3) were directly involved in selling activities, and (4) had a customer base comprising at least two-thirds B2B customers. As the panel providers could not directly screen their members according to these criteria, they sought participation from members who had specified “sales” as profession when registering for the panel. These members were invited via email to participate in the survey and were promised a small monetary incentive for participation if they met all necessary criteria. Visitors to the website were admitted to the questionnaire if they met the four requirements outlined above. We used four corresponding filter questions, and 527 of 2,166 visitors met these initial requirements. Of these, 448 (85%) provided complete responses.

To ensure data quality, which can be problematic in online surveys, we excluded a number of participants. First, we had included a control question asking participants to state the share of revenue they made from business customers (compared to consumers). Responses to an open question asking for the exact percentage resulted in exclusion of 139 respondents who acknowledged that their B2B share of customers was less than 60%. Second, two other open questions asking participants to describe the product they were selling and to state the official name of their job led to exclusion of 13 respondents for unsuitable responses (e.g., “everything” with regard to the product question or “self-employed bus driver” with regard to the job description). Third, we also excluded 7 respondents who had taken five minutes or less to complete the questionnaire (the median response time was a little more than 19 minutes). Lastly, by accident a question regarding the analyses required for feature communication in selling (not included in our analyses described below) was included twice in the questionnaire (one placed directly after the other). We excluded 63 participants (14%) who gave different answers to these identical questions. Our final sample consisted of 226 salespeople, described in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample composition.

Element	%
Number of customers served	%
More than 500	10
100–500	35
50–99	20
21–49	15
Fewer than 20	20
Share of revenues from business customers	%
100%	53
90–99%	25
80–89%	12
70–79%	5
60–69%	4
Share of revenues from services	%
100%	14
75–99%	6
55–74%	14
25–54%	9
1–24%	33
None	25
Work experience	%
Less than five years	19
Five to less than ten years	20
Ten to less than fifteen years	21
More than fifteen years	40

Measurement evaluation

Communication foci in selling

Drawing on the literature and the conceptual considerations laid out previously, we created at least two items for each stage of the sales process in the conceptual framework (three items were included for the discussion stage). Items and their reliabilities (as per Fornell and Larcker 1981) are listed in Appendix A. To evaluate the scales, we employed confirmatory factor analysis using the R package lavaan (Rosseel 2012). We specified each communication focus as a second-order construct, measured through four first-order constructs reflecting the communication stages (proposal, presentation, discussion, closing).

Regarding *value communication in selling*, reliabilities for individual items range from .80 to .95, indicating high reliability. Item reliabilities for the first-order factors range from .89 (proposal stage) to .96 (presentation stage). This result implies an average variance extracted of the first-order constructs of AVE = .93. The first-order factors correlate highly with correlations ranging from .90 ($r_{\text{proposal, discussion}}$) to .95 ($r_{\text{presentation, closing}}$). Internal consistency (composite reliability) of the second order-factor is very high (CR = .98). The second-order measurement model fits the data better than a first-order measurement model of value communication in selling using all indicators ($\Delta\chi^2 = 105.35$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$). Generally, the overall fit indices indicate acceptable (or much better) fit of the second-order model (CFI = .97; TLI/NNFI = .95; SRMR = .02) with the exception of the RMSEA (.13), which is larger than the upper threshold of .10 (MacCallum, Browne, and Sugawara 1996). The two largest modification indices suggest that model fit could be improved if correlated errors were allowed between the proposal and presentation stages as well as between the discussion and closing stages. This finding could suggest an additional model layer, where the stages of value communication are linked in sets of two. Analysis of a model where the discussion stage and the closing stage were specified to have correlated errors showed the fit of the model improves (CFI = .98; TLI/NNFI = .97; SRMR = .02; RMSEA = .10). While this result supports the general logic of our scale, in further analyses only a single score is used and we did not pursue this further.

Regarding *discount communication in selling*, reliabilities for individual items range from .31 to .96, mostly indicating high reliability. Item reliabilities for the first-order factors range from .68 (proposal stage) to .90 (closing stage), implying an average variance extracted of the first-order constructs of AVE = .81. The first-order factors correlate highly, with correlations ranging from .75 ($r_{\text{proposal, presentations}}$) to .87 ($r_{\text{discussion, closing}}$). Internal consistency (composite reliability) of the second order-factor is very high (CR = .94). Generally, the overall fit indices indicate acceptable (or much better) fit of the second-order model (CFI = .92; TLI/NNFI = .92; SRMR = .04), again with the exception of the RMSEA (.12). Here, inspection of the modification indices reveals that fit can be improved by including cross loadings of the presentation items on the proposal factor. As with value communication,

this result supports the logic of our scale and is captured with our use of a single score in further analyses.

Concerning *benefit communication in selling*, reliabilities for individual items range from .68 to .84, indicating high reliability. Reliabilities for first-order factors range from .84 (discussion stage) to .98 (closing stage), implying an average variance extracted of the first-order constructs of $AVE = .91$. The first-order factors correlate highly, with correlations ranging from .86 ($r_{\text{proposal, discussion}}$) to .95 ($r_{\text{presentation, closing}}$). Internal consistency (composite reliability) of the second order-factor is very high ($CR = .97$). Overall fit indices indicate acceptable (or much better) fit of the second-order model ($CFI = .92$; $TLI/NNFI = .92$; $SRMR = .04$; $RMSEA = .10$).

Lastly, with regard to *feature communication in selling*, reliabilities for individual items range from .55 to .82, indicating high reliability. Reliabilities for first-order factors range from .88 (closing stage) to .997 (presentation stage), implying an average variance extracted of the first-order constructs of $AVE = .94$. The first-order factors correlate highly, with correlations ranging from .90 ($r_{\text{proposal, closing}}$) to .99 ($r_{\text{discussion, closing}}$). Internal consistency (composite reliability) of the second-order factor is very high ($CR = .99$). Overall fit indices indicate acceptable (or much better) fit of the second-order model ($CFI = .97$; $TLI/NNFI = .95$; $SRMR = .03$), again with the exception of the $RMSEA (.11)$. Inspection of modification indices reveals the same underlying structure as for value communication. No further action was taken.

To arrive at single indices for the four communication foci in selling, we first computed scores for the individual dimensions, which we then aggregated to single scores. In both steps, we rely on weighted averages, using unstandardized factor loadings as weights.

Other constructs

We followed standard psychometric procedures for developing and evaluating measures for the constructs. The exact wording of all items and item reliabilities (Fornell and Larcker 1981) are provided in Appendices A and B. Construct reliabilities, average variances extracted (AVEs) and inter-construct correlations are listed in Table 2.

To measure our focal dependent variable sales performance, we used the self-report procedure (Behrman and Perreault 1982), in which salespeople assess their performance compared to that of their colleagues. We expanded the scale used by Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann (2011a) so that we cover six performance dimensions: sales, orders, total contribution margin, sales of new products, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

We turned to literature on cross-functional integration to develop measures for *salesperson communication with internal marketing, R&D, operations, and finance*. Specifically, we adapted the cross-functional integration scale (Brettel et al. 2011) by focusing on communication by the salesperson as an individual. For instance, we asked salespeople to state whether they “exchange a lot of information with the marketing department.” We further adapted these scales to

measure *salesperson communication with customer purchasing, R&D, operations, and finance*. In this form, the scope of these measures is expanded for this study.

We used a scale from Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann (2011b) to measure *product customization*. To measure whether the offering of the salesperson’s firm has a *product quality focus*, we used a single item that asks salespeople to assess on a five-point semantic differential with anchors the supplier’s strategy in terms of “cost leadership” and “quality leadership.” To measure *customer orientation*, we used the “task-related customer orientation” scale (Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann 2011b). *Adaptive selling* is measured using three items that are related (but not similar) to items from the reduced adaptive selling inventory (Robinson et al. 2002). Lastly, *salesperson time allocated to new customer acquisition* is a single item measuring the relative amount of time salespeople spent on acquiring new customers.

Discriminant validity

Generally, discriminant validity is assessed using the criterion introduced by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Discriminant validity is assumed to be present if each latent variable explains more variance of its indicators (measured through the average variance extracted) than of any other construct in the model (measured through the squared correlation). The correlation matrix in Table 2 shows that this criterion is met by all construct pairs. Below, we investigate some construct pairs more closely, as they are of particular interest.

Relationships of communication foci with adaptive selling and customer orientation

In introducing communication foci in selling to the literature, an important question is how each relates to two central constructs in the sales literature: customer orientation and adaptive selling (Franke and Park 2006). Value communication in selling correlates significantly with the two constructs. However, the correlations are not especially high ($r = .23$ for adaptive selling, $r = .20$ for customer orientation). Discount communication in selling is not correlated with customer orientation ($r = .04$), but is weakly correlated with adaptive selling ($r = .16$). Benefit communication in selling correlates strongly with customer orientation ($r = .6$) and is also associated with adaptive selling ($r = .32$). Finally, feature communication in selling is also quite strongly correlated with customer orientation ($r = .47$) and is also associated with adaptive selling ($r = .21$). With the possible exception of benefit communication in selling (which seems to be closely linked to customer orientation), the three other communication foci in selling seem to constitute phenomena that are clearly distinguishable empirically from these established constructs.

Relationships between communication foci in selling

A second important question in the context of our research is how the four communication foci are related to each

Table 2. Correlations and measurement information.

	M	SD	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1 Value communication	4.23	1.62	.98	.93	1.00																	
2 Discount communication	3.83	1.35	.94	.81	.51	1.00																
3 Benefit communication	5.48	1.23	.97	.91	.35	.11	1.00															
4 Feature communication	5.20	1.33	.99	.84	.30	.18	.74	1.00														
5 Sales performance	4.89	.97	.91	.64	.10	-.05	.23	.12	1.00													
6 Customer orientation	5.90	.90	.95	.67	.20	.04	.60	.47	.30	1.00												
7 Adaptive selling	5.53	1.04	.88	.72	.23	.16	.32	.21	.33	.44	1.00											
8 Product customization	5.07	1.6	.90	.76	.22	.09	.21	.25	-.04	.2	.06	1.00										
9 CFC – Marketing	4.19	1.75	.83	.62	.25	.21	.16	.18	.08	.16	.19	.10	1.00									
10 CFC – R&D	3.49	1.75	.85	.65	.17	.06	.17	.26	.09	.11	.14	.26	.50	1.00								
11 CFC – Operations	3.97	1.79	.84	.64	.13	.09	.16	.19	.06	.12	.16	.21	.35	.69	1.00							
12 CFC – Finance	3.95	1.65	.80	.57	.19	.05	.14	.23	.18	.18	.19	.03	.34	.45	.48	1.00						
13 IEC – Purchasing	4.25	1.79	.85	.65	.27	.23	.19	.28	.10	.16	.22	.00	.40	.42	.39	.35	1.00					
14 IEC – R&D	3.26	1.9	.92	.80	.28	.21	.16	.24	.05	.05	.12	.21	.46	.73	.58	.45	.47	1.00				
15 IEC – Operations	3.55	1.84	.89	.74	.23	.19	.20	.24	.08	.09	.22	.17	.37	.54	.68	.40	.47	.65	1.00			
16 IEC – Finance	3.53	1.88	.90	.75	.35	.18	.21	.25	.08	.14	.22	.12	.27	.31	.63	.38	.48	.53	.100			
17 Product quality focus	3.86	1.08	–	–	.07	-.12	.26	.28	.12	.22	.12	.12	.06	.16	.09	.07	.07	.04	.06	.01	1.00	
18 % SP time for new customer acquisition	.29	.26	–	–	.18	.02	.15	.03	.02	.10	-.03	.02	.14	.00	-.07	-.02	-.05	.05	-.02	.06	-.10	1.00

$N=226$ salespeople, CFC: cross-functional communication, IEC: Information exchange with customer.

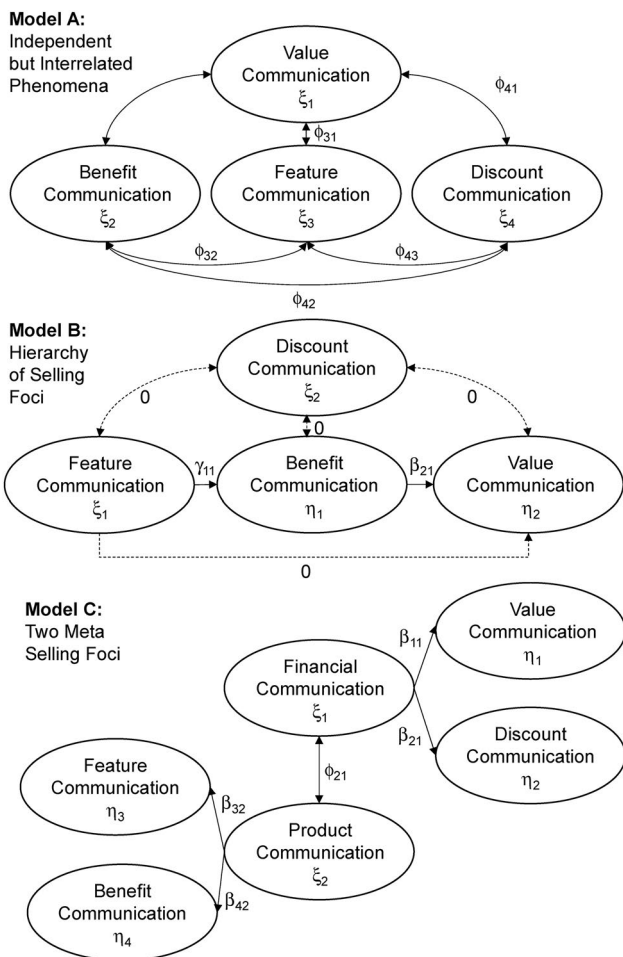


Figure 2. Different models of relationships between the four communication foci in selling.

other. We compare three factorial structures that are depicted in Figure 2.

In Model A, all four communication foci are specified as correlated but separate constructs. Model B specifies a hierarchy of the communication foci, where benefit

communication is an outcome of feature communication, and value communication an outcome of benefit communication. Discount communication is modeled as a completely independent phenomenon, as it focuses on price whereas the other three constructs address product characteristics. Model C is based on an investigation of the correlation matrix (Table 2). Empirically, discount communication correlates with value communication with $r = .51$, whereas benefit communication and feature communication correlate with $r = .74$. This difference could suggest that a latent second-order factorial structure is behind the correlational pattern. Discount communication and value communication could be viewed as resulting from the salesperson's focus on finance in customer conversations, and benefit communication and feature communication could reflect a salesperson's focus on the product in these conversations.

Using structural equation modeling (SEM), we compare the three models presented in Figure 2 using chi-square difference tests. This comparison is possible because Models B and C are nested in Model A. The fit of Model B is significantly worse than the fit of Model A ($\Delta\chi^2 = 73.12$, $df = 4$, $p \leq .001$). Consistent with bivariate correlations, the hierarchy of communication foci model is not supported by the data. Likewise, the two-conversations model (C) is associated with significant deterioration of model fit compared to Model A, albeit less dramatically ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.33$, $df = 1$, $p \leq .05$). Therefore, we continue by treating the four constructs as distinct phenomena as in Model A.

Drivers and outcomes

Drivers of value communication in selling

Table 3 shows regression results of our exploratory analysis of drivers of the four communication foci in selling. Several interesting patterns emerge. We use regression over SEM, because SEM is typically considered a confirmatory method (Byrne 2013) and our sample size is too small given the number of parameters that would need to be estimated in SEM (Raykov and Widaman 1995).

First, the four communication foci are driven by substantially different sets of drivers, indicating that they are employed in different settings. If the offering is highly customized, salespeople focus on value ($b = .17, p < .05$) and features ($b = .10, p < .05$). A quality focus entails a focus on benefits ($b = .16, p < .05$) and features ($b = .20, p < .05$). Salespeople who are highly customer-oriented focus on benefits ($b = .71, p < .05$) and features ($b = .58, p < .05$) in their communication, but, interestingly, not on value ($b = .08, p > .10$). Salespeople interested in acquiring new customers emphasize value ($b = .93, p < .05$) and benefits ($b = .52, p < .05$).

Salespeople seem to employ discount selling more if they are routinely in touch with marketing ($b = .12, p < .05$) and less if they are communicating regularly with R&D ($b = -.21, p < .05$). Apart from these effects, internal, cross-functional communication does not seem to affect a salesperson's choice of communication foci in selling. In terms of external communication with customer firms, interactions with purchasing increase the use of discount communication ($b = .12, p < .05$) and feature communication ($b = .10, p < .05$). Information exchange with customer finance departments is associated with value communication ($b = .19, p < .05$).

Performance outcomes of communication foci

Table 4 shows the regression results that link communication foci in selling exploratorily to sales performance. We estimated six models.

In the first four models, we consider the link between each communication focus and sales performance separately. In this analysis, only benefit communication emerges as substantively related to performance ($b = .18, p < .01$). Interestingly, the other communication foci are only barely related to sales performance or not at all. The same pattern of results occurs in a model that includes all communication foci at the same time. Again, only benefit communication

is related to sales performance. When the remaining variables from our driver analysis are included as controls in the last model, the effect of benefit communication in selling on sales performance disappears. Instead, consistent with earlier research on sales performance (e.g., Franke and Park 2006) adaptive selling is strongly associated with sales performance ($b = .22, p < .07$).

In sum, our results indicate that no communication focus in selling is a panacea when it comes to sales performance. Instead, the effectiveness of communication foci may depend on the situation, an idea we explore in an additional analysis described in the next section.

Exploratory analysis of contingency effects

The results reported on performance outcomes reveal that no association exists between the four communication foci and performance if we control for other variables, especially customer orientation and adaptive selling. Therefore, we test for possible contingency effects: Do interactions occur between the variables included in our models and the communication foci?

To test this possibility, we estimated four regression models that include all variables from the full model in Table 4 plus the interactions between one communication focus and all variables except the other communication foci. For example, one model included interactions between value communication and all variables except discount communication, benefit communication, and feature communication. We then compared the explanatory power for these models to the full model from Table 4. Only the model including interactions with value communication has an R -squared that is significantly higher than the full model ($\Delta R^2 = .10, F(13,195) = 2.16, p < .05$). While the model including interactions with feature communication has an R -squared that is marginally higher ($\Delta R^2 = .08, F(13,195) = 1.60, p < .10$), we focus on contingency factors with regard to value

Table 3. Drivers of the four communication foci in selling.

Independent variables	Dependent variables: Communication focus in selling			
	Value	Discount	Benefits	Features
Customer information needs				
Customization	.17 (.07)*	.07 (.06)	.04 (.04)	.10 (.05)*
Quality focus	.05 (.09)	-.16 (.08) ⁺	.16 (.06)*	.20 (.07)*
% SP time for new customer acquisition	.93 (.39)*	-.07 (.34)	.52 (.26)*	-.00 (.30)
Salesperson conversation behaviors				
Customer orientation	.08 (.13)	-.04 (.11)	.71 (.08)*	.58 (.10)*
Adaptive selling	.20 (.11) ⁺	.16 (.09) ⁺	.05 (.07)	-.17 (.08)
Salesperson cross-functional communication (CFC)				
Marketing	.09 (.07)	.12 (.06)*	-.01 (.04)	-.03 (.07)
Finance	-.07 (.09)	-.08 (.08)	-.06 (.06)	.03 (.07)
Operations	-.03 (.09)	.01 (.08)	-.01 (.06)	-.10 (.07)
R&D	-.09 (.10)	-.21 (.09)*	.00 (.07)	.08 (.08)
Information exchange with customer (IEC)				
Purchasing	.16 (.07) ⁺	.12 (.06)*	.03 (.04)	.10 (.05)*
Finance	.19 (.08)*	.04 (.07)	.06 (.05)	.04 (.06)
Operations	-.09 (.09)	.02 (.08)	.04 (.06)	.07 (.07)
R&D	.14 (.09)	.16 (.08)*	.03 (.06)	.03 (.07)
N (Observations)	226	226	226	226
Largest Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)	3.28	3.28	3.28	3.28
R^2 / Adjusted R^2	.25 / .20	.16 / .11	.42 / .39	.38 / .33

Unstandardized parameters are shown. Standard errors in parentheses. +: $p \leq .10$; *: $p \leq .05$ in bold (based on two-tailed tests). Variance inflation factors are identical across models, because the set of antecedents does not change.

Table 4. Outcomes of four communication foci in selling.

	Models with salesperson performance as dependent variable					
	Value only	Discount only	Benefit only	Feature only	All Foci	Foci and controls
Communication focus in selling						
Value communication	.06 (.04)				.05 (.05)	.04 (.05)
Discount communication		-.03 (.05)			-.07 (.05)	-.07 (.06)
Benefit communication			.18 (.05)*		.23 (.08)*	.12 (.09)
Feature communication				.08 (.05) ⁺	-.07 (.07)	-.09 (.07)
Customer information needs						
Customization						-.04 (.04)
Quality focus						.03 (.06)
% SP Time for New Customer Acquisition						-.01 (.25)
Salesperson conversation behaviors						
Customer orientation						.17 (.09) ⁺
Adaptive selling						.21 (.07)*
Salesperson cross-functional communication (CFC)						
Marketing						-.02 (.04)
Finance						.12 (.06)⁺
Operations						-.07 (.06)
R&D						.03 (.06)
Information exchange with customer (IEC)						
Purchasing						-.01 (.05)
Finance						-.07 (.05)
Operations						.04 (.06)
R&D						.00 (.06)
N (Observations)	226	226	226	226	226	226
Largest variance inflation factor (VIF)	–	–	–	–	2.34	3.40
R ² / Adjusted R ²	.01 / .01	.00 / –.00	.05 / .05	.01 / .01	.07 / .05	.19 / .12

Unstandardized parameters are shown. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. +: $p \leq .10$; *: $p \leq .05$ in bold (based on two-tailed tests).

communication. Plots of the interaction effects are shown in Figure 3.

Value communication seems to be more effective if the salesperson does not engage in adaptive selling ($b_{\text{Value} \times \text{Adaptive}} = -.10, p < .01$), spends more time on selling to existing customers ($b_{\text{Value} \times \text{PercentageTimeNewCustomerAcquisition}} = -.34, p < .05$), and actively exchanges information with the customer finance department ($b_{\text{Value} \times \text{InformationExchangeCustomerFinance}} = .06, p < .05$).

Robustness check

As we use single-source survey data, common method bias is a potential threat to our findings of simple effects (Siemsen, Roth, and Oliveira 2010). To learn whether our results are affected by common method bias, we estimated the models from Table 3 and the final model from Table 4 (the model that includes all foci and controls) while controlling for a common method factor (Podsakoff et al. 2003) that loads on all indicator variables of multi-item scales but is specified to be uncorrelated with the latent variables. Since these types of analyses are not possible using regression, we switch to SEM. As the sample size requirements are obviously still not met (in these models many more parameters are estimated), our main focus lies on comparing the results from SEM models with and without common method factors, but not on a comparison with our main results from the previous section. Moreover, instead of modeling the communication foci as a second-order construct, to somewhat simplify the SEMs we measured them as first-order constructs, with aggregated scores for each dimension as indicators.

We computed the average share of variance in the indicators of each communication foci construct explained by the common method factor. For the driver models, the

resulting values are very low (value communication, 1.3%; discount communication, 0.5%; benefit communication, 0.4%; feature communication, 0.3%). Results for the outcome model are also very low (value communication, 1.5%; discount communication, 0.6%; benefit communication, 0.7%; feature communication, 0.4%). Overall, these results imply that common method variance is probably not a substantial threat to the validity of our findings.

We compared the overall explanatory power of the SEM models with and without the common method factor. In the driver models, we observe that accounting for common method variance reduces the overall R -squared for discount communication by only .044, for feature communication by .013, for benefit communication by .006, and for value communication by .013. In the SEM outcome model, it reduces the overall R -squared by .004. Again, this result implies that common method variance is probably not a substantial threat.

Finally, our approach allows us to compare the substantive results of SEM models with and without a common method factor—that is, the consistency of the structural relationships. Regarding the models in Table 3 for value communication and benefit communication, results are fully consistent. Regarding feature communication, the effect of product customization is only a trend in the model without common method factor, but fully present in the model with a common method. Regarding discount communication, the pattern of statistical significance changes somewhat; in particular, the effects regarding cross-functional communication and information exchange with the customer are only marginally significant in the model with common method factor. Regarding the outcome models in Table 4, we find that the effect of cross-functional communication with finance is only marginally significant in the model without common method factor and statistically significant in the model with

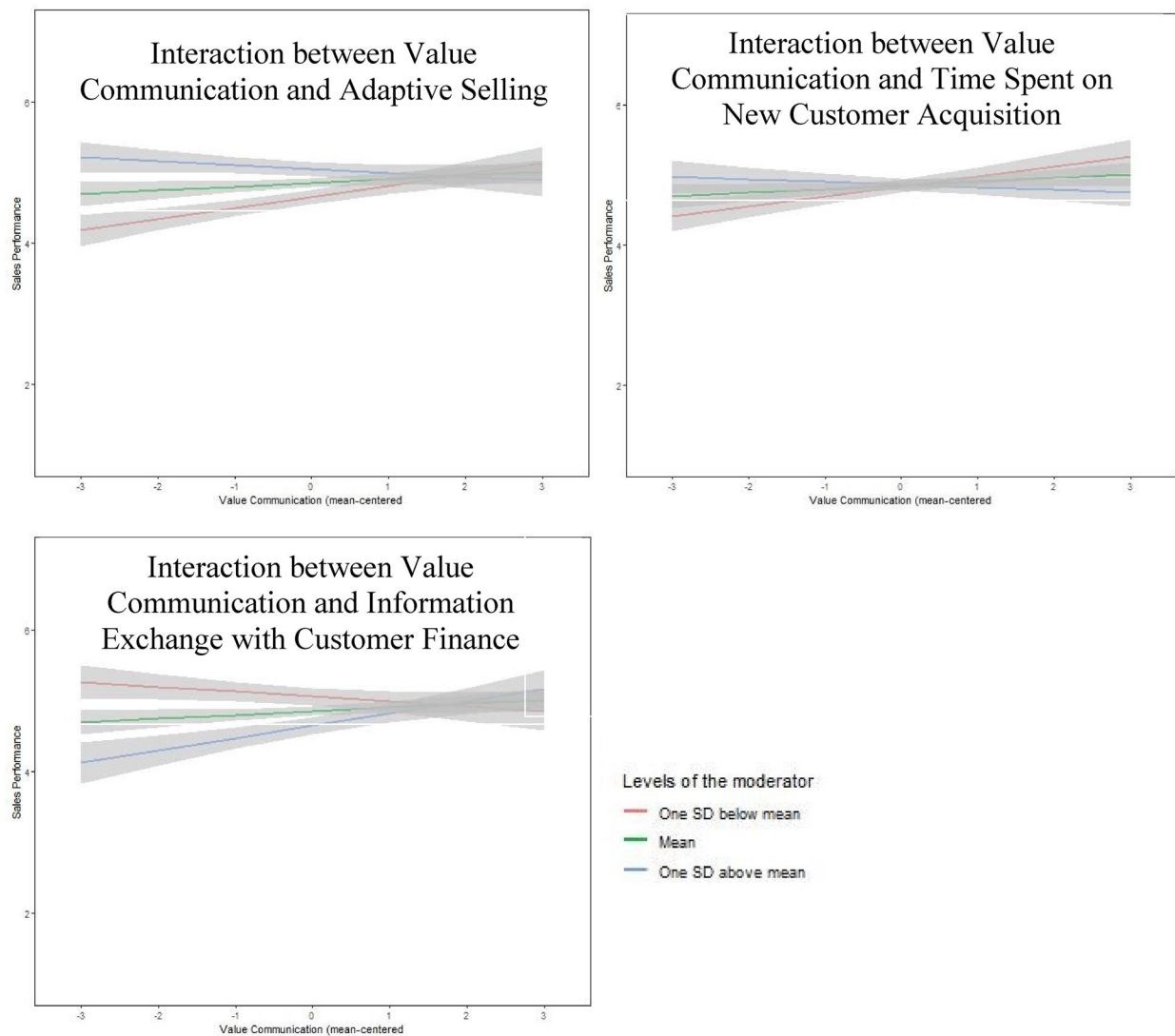


Figure 3. Regression plots for interactions of value communication with situational variables.

a common method factor. Taken together, we only observe very limited changes when a common method factor is included, making us believe that common method bias is not a key issue with our data.

Discussion

Research implications

Previous research has looked mostly at only value-based selling, with research on other communication foci such as feature selling or benefits selling being basically absent, despite the importance of these approaches for practitioners. As a basis for future research, this study adopts a comparative perspective by looking at various communication foci of salespeople. We start with the idea that customers in business markets face difficult choice problems and want to think about these in different ways (choice construal), making different kinds of information relevant for their decisions.

As a first contribution, we conceptualize four communication foci in B2B selling: value communication, benefit

communication, feature communication, and discount communication. These foci differ in terms of the kinds of information communicated to customers during sales interactions. We include four stages of these interactions: developing a proposal, presenting the offering to the prospective customer, discussing the offering with the prospective customer, and closing the sales encounter. These communication foci emphasize communication from the perspective of information relevance—we do not address the broader customer-supplier relationship or the relational aspect of sales interactions. Drawing on construal level theory (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007), it is important to consider these diverse communication foci, because different information may be relevant for the customer, depending on the criteria they want to consider, the level of detail of information they want to take into account, and how they want to make tradeoffs (Cho, Khan, and Dhar 2013; Khan, Zhu, and Kalra 2011).

Future research may examine the communication foci as perceived by actual customers. A limitation of our study is that we were unable to measure the relevance of the

communication foci from the customer's point of view directly, since we rely only on salesperson self-reported performance. Future research may explicitly address the choice construal of customers, factors influencing this (for example, various contingencies related to the salesperson, selling organization, offering, customer relationship, and competitors), and the effects of the customer's choice construal in terms of their perception of the relevance of the various communication foci.

Second, we empirically investigate these communication foci in a cross-industry sample of 226 B2B salespeople. Several results support the validity of the measures of these sales foci. A comparison of three measurement models, which focus on the links between the four constructs, indicates that these four constructs measure distinct phenomena that cannot be structured in a hierarchy or aggregated to broader conversation foci. Furthermore, the results regarding the drivers of these communication foci provide support for the newly developed measures of these sales foci. We find that the four foci are driven by substantially different sets of drivers, indicating that they are used in different settings.

A comparison with customer orientation indicates that these communication foci capture an intriguing new phenomenon, because these communication foci seem to be stronger differentiators of selling situations than the established construct of customer orientation. Especially the means of the value and discount communication are close to the midpoint of the scale (4.23, 3.83) and their standard deviations are substantially larger than one (1.62 and 1.35), which implies considerable variation between salespeople. However, in the literature basically every salesperson self-reports high customer orientation with differences being mere nuances. For instance, for customer orientation, Homburg, Klarmann, and Müller (2011b) report a mean of 6.08 with a standard deviation of 0.59, and Terho et al. (2015) report a mean of 6.31 with a standard deviation of 0.45. Similarly, in our study, customer orientation has a mean of 5.90 with a standard deviation of 0.90. Interestingly, compared to value communication in our study, the value selling scale employed by Terho et al. (2015) creates less variation among salespeople, with a mean of 5.72 and a standard deviation of 0.61. Thus, our study reveals these communication foci capture an intriguing new phenomenon.

As a third contribution, we investigate the consequences of these four communication foci for self-reported sales performance. Although a strong effect of benefit communication in selling on sales performance seems to occur if only this relationship is estimated, this association disappears in models that include controls. Presumably benefit communication in selling is so closely related to customer orientation that it no longer has a simple effect on sales performance when customer orientation is controlled for. For discount communication, feature communication, and value communication, we find no evidence for consistent simple effects on sales performance.

One possible explanation for finding no simple performance effects of the four communication foci is the theoretical idea of information relevance. A specific focus on

communication will increase performance only if the information conveyed is actually helpful in the customer decision-making process. We investigated interaction effects between the communication foci and situational variables. The results suggest that value communication is relevant for performance, but only in specific situations, which is consistent with priori research (Palmatier et al. 2006; Payne, Frow, and Eggert 2017; Terho et al. 2015; 2017). Value communication should therefore be used cautiously, because it is also a costly approach. We will discuss two interaction results more specifically, regarding information exchange with customer finance departments and adaptive selling, and suggest implications for research looking the interplay of customer orientation and value communication.

Value communication is more beneficial when complemented with *information from customer finance departments*, which is also a driver of value communication. Value communication requires salespeople to become interorganizational management accountants (cf. Wilken et al. 2010; Wouters and Kirchberger 2015). The present study could not investigate this construct at a more detailed level, thus providing another starting point for future research. What kind of information needs to be exchanged, and in which "direction"? What makes customers share their data? One difficulty with the exchange of detailed financial information between companies is that the data may not be based on the same standards (Hergert and Morris 1989). How does the salesperson ensure consistent interpretation?

Moreover, value communication in selling and *adaptive selling* is substitutes. Adaptive selling has overall found to be a beneficial approach in terms of sales performance (Franke and Park 2006; McFarland 2019). In our study too, adaptive selling was positively associated with salesperson performance. Intriguingly, at the same time we found that the combination of adaptive selling and value communication in selling is not beneficial. Value communication in selling has a positive effect on sales performance if adaptive selling is sufficiently low. Again, why this is the case is unclear and provides for interesting future research. It may indicate that the salesperson should not combine value communication with adaptive selling, because for value communication to be successful, the salesperson must consistently focus on financial communication about customer value throughout the selling process and avoid changing the communication focus too much, perhaps improvising in response to the particular situation. If adaptive selling is used, sales behavior during a customer interaction is flexible and strict adherence to financial selling communication may not be beneficial. It is important to better understand the combination of value-based selling and adaptive selling. Specifically within adaptive selling, it would be interesting to study the hardly researched step of adapting the selling strategy, which could be seen as a cognitive process in which the salesperson decides on adjustments based on feedback obtained in the evaluation step (McFarland 2019). A key question is whether such adjustments can be beneficial in the sense that based on better understanding of the customer's choice construal, adaptation enables the salesperson to provide more relevant information. That would be a very specific

basis for adjustment of the salesperson's argumentation, which could perhaps be seen as a particular facet of adapting to a better understanding of the customer's needs. Adaptation of selling behavior may occur in response to various kinds of feedback cues and besides the customer's needs, these include the customers' personality, social status, communication style, body language, or relationship length (Alavi, Habel, and Linsenmayer 2019). On the other hand, making adjustments within the sales conversation might lead to confusion or information overload, thereby reducing information relevance and the effectiveness of the sales interaction.

Finally, it is relevant to discuss the relationship between value communication and *customer orientation*, as this is such an important construct in marketing and sales research (Habel et al. 2020). We found that customer orientation does not drive value communication in selling, whereas earlier research has found evidence for a positive association between customer orientation and value-based selling (Mullins, Menguc, and Panagopoulos 2020; Terho et al. 2017). Future research could address causes of these diverging results. Possibly it occurs because value communication in selling and may not be as strongly driven by the customer orientation of salespeople as value-based selling in general. Future research could also look in more detail how customer orientation and value communication could go together and reinforce each other. Perhaps value-based communication could be seen as a construct that helps to make customer orientation more effective by translating customer orientation in practical communication behavior that the customer experiences and appreciates. Such an investigation would benefit from using another measurement of customer orientation, namely an approach that measures the customers' perceptions of its suppliers' customer orientation (Habel et al. 2020). The difference is important, because firms may take efforts to be more customer oriented and salespeople may judge their own behavior as being highly customer oriented, but customers may not necessarily perceive those actions and behaviors in the same way (Habel et al. 2020). Measuring customer orientation from the customers' point view could be combined with the above mentioned idea to explicitly measure the choice construal and information relevance also from the customers' point of view.

Managerial implications

For practitioners interested in implementing a communication focus in selling in their firm or as a personal selling strategy, our research suggests that several factors explain why salespeople could adopt certain communication foci. In particular, our research suggest that these drivers are quite different for the various communication foci, implying that salespeople who are engaging in diverse kinds of sales interactions would be choosing a range of communication foci. Specifically for value communication, this focus would be expected if products are highly customized, salespeople are interested in acquiring new customers, and if they are exchanging much information with customer finance departments.

However, practitioners also need to be aware that use of these communication foci may not directly increase sales performance. Theoretically and empirically, our research suggests that their effectiveness will depend on the information relevance for the customer. In particular, our results suggest that value communication in selling will be very effective in some situations and ineffective in other situations. While its impact may be enhanced by salesperson customer orientation, its effect is definitively reduced by using adaptive selling. Whether value communication is adopted for a particular sales interaction requires careful consideration—in that sense, the selling communication focus needs to be adapted to the situation—and consistent use during the interaction. In addition, value communication requires information exchange with customer finance departments, which may not be feasible in a number of sales situations. Importantly, our results imply that this information from customers cannot be substituted by information from departments within the salesperson's organization.

Requiring external financial information also implies that salespeople using value communication must have skills for dealing with customer cost data. This requirement is significant because an affinity for numbers is often not what firms look for in salespeople and is sometimes even considered to be at odds with being a "real" salesperson. However, value-based selling surpasses ordinary sales talk—it is an evidence-based, rational influence tactic.

Our results also point managers to a certain degree of misalignment between when value communication is used in selling and when it is effective. Our results suggest that salespeople use more value communication if they spend a lot of time acquiring new customers. However, value communication seems to interact negatively with the time spent on new customer acquisition, suggesting it is more effective with existing customers.

Notes

1. To name just a few examples of blogs: Maria Trizna, May 24, 2018, "Value Selling: The Difference Between Features, Benefits, and Value" <https://www.salesresult.com/blog/value-selling-the-difference-between-features-benefits-and-value>. Pembroke Nelson, June 28, 2020, "Use Features & Benefits to Boost Sales" <https://www.e-marketingassociates.com/blog/use-features-benefits-to-boost-sales>. Examples of consulting firm publications: Lou Schachter and Rick Cheatham (2013) "Closing the Value Gap" BTS Sales Practice, <https://www.bts.com/docs/default-source/white-papers/bts-closing-the-value-gap.pdf>. Value Selling Associates, "What is Value Selling" <https://www.valueselling.com/value-based-selling>. ROI Selling, "Growing and Accelerating Sales with Value Selling Tools" <https://www.roi-selling.com/resources>.
2. The extreme contrast between search results in Google Scholar versus Google generally provides some evidence for the difference that these foci receive inside and outside academic research. In Scholar, using the various communication foci and looking in sources with "marketing" in the title, yielded the following number of results: "discount selling" source:marketing: 15; "benefit selling" source:marketing: 17; "feature communication in selling" source:marketing: 3; "value selling" source:marketing: 93. These are very low numbers (especially compared to "adaptive selling" source:marketing: 1130 results), illustrating that

these communication foci are a small topic in research papers. However, generally searching in Google yielded: “discount selling” 322,000 results; “discount selling” “business to business” 52,500 results; “benefit selling” 206,000 results; “benefit selling” “business to business” 60,400 results; “feature communication in selling” 71,400 results; “feature communication in selling” “business to business” 19,300 results; “value selling” 559,000 results; “value selling” “business to business” 322,000 results. These are very high numbers, suggesting that these communication foci are a particularly significant topic for practice. Searches conducted on 20 August 2021.

3. These traditional steps are 1. Prospecting, 2. Preapproach, 3. Approach, 4. Presentation, 5. Overcoming objections, 6. Close, and 7. Follow-up (Dubinsky 1981). The evolved steps are 1. Customer retention and deletion, 2. Database and knowledge management, 3. Nurturing the relationship (relationship selling), 4. Marketing the product, 5. Problem solving, 6. Adding value / satisfying needs, 7. Customer relationship marketing.
4. Our measurement scale originally included six stages, with analyzing the situation, and preparing the offering as the first two. These two plus our first stage could be seen as more detailed stages of Moncrief and Marshall’s step two. Although all these three preparatory stages are essential for the information-based interaction with the customer (which is why we had included these), the first two stages are, strictly speaking, not part of the actual sales interaction with the customer, and we excluded these from the analyses.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank seminar participants from the Stockholm School of Economics, participants of the European Marketing Academy (EMAC) Conference, and participants of the Accounting section of the German Economic Association’s annual workshop for their helpful comments on the research described in the manuscript.

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A. Items and item reliabilities (IR) for the four selling communication foci

Value Communication		Benefit Communication		Feature Communication		Discount Communication	
Item	IR	Item	IR	Item	IR	Item	IR
Proposal							
In our proposal, I translate the value of our offering for the customer into a common monetary metric, such as euros per year.	.80	In our proposal, I translate the technical and functional characteristics of our offering into clearly defined benefits for the customer.	.77	In our proposal, I take care to illustrate in detail the technical and functional superiority of our offering.	.79	In our proposal, I take care to illustrate in detail the low price of our offering.	.56
Evidence for the monetary value of our offering is the focal element of our proposal.	.88	Evidence of the benefits our offering creates is the focal element of our proposal.	.74	Evidence for the technical and functional superiority of our offering is the focal element of our proposal.	.82	Evidence for the price advantage of our offering is the focal element of our proposal.	.96
Presentation							
The monetary value of our offering is a key element of my sales pitch.	.89	The benefits created through our offering are a key element of my sales pitch.	.82	The technical and functional characteristics of our offering are key elements of my sales pitch.	.83	The price of our offering is a key element in my sales pitch.	.81
My sales presentations focus on the monetary value that our offering provides for the customer after the purchase.	.92	My sales presentations focus on the way our offering satisfies the needs of the customer.	.80	My sales presentations focus on the technical and functional superiority of our offering.	.80	My sales presentations focus on the price.	.77
Discussion							
I try to steer discussions of our offering in the direction of talking about the monetary value of our offering for the customer.	.77	I try to steer discussions of our offering in the direction of talking about the way our offering satisfies existing customer needs.	.68	I try to steer discussions of our offering in the direction of talking about the technical and functional characteristics of our offering.	.68	I try to steer discussions of our offering in the direction of talking about the price of our offering.	.66
I address customer objections concerning our offering by discussing their implications for the monetary value of our offering for the customer.	.85	I address customer objections concerning our offering by discussing their implications for the way our offering satisfies customer needs.	.84	I address customer objections concerning our offering by discussing the technical and functional characteristics of our offering.	.78	I address customer objections concerning our offering by discussing the price of our offering.	.71
If we discuss changes of our offering, I clearly state the implications for the customer in monetary terms.	.82	If we discuss changes of our offering, I clearly state how these affect how our offering satisfies customer needs.	.76	If we discuss changes of our offering, I clearly state how these affect its technical and functional standards.	.55	If we discuss changes of our offering, I clearly state how these affect its price.	.31
Closing							
To close the sales encounter, I summarize our offering by stating its monetary value for the customer.	.88	To close the sales encounter, I summarize our offering by stating its key benefits for the customer.	.77	To close the sales encounter, I summarize our offering by highlighting its key technical and functional characteristics.	.81	To close the sales encounter, I summarize our offering by highlighting its low price.	.75
When closing the sales encounter, my recommendations maximize the monetary value of our offering for the customer.	.92	When closing the sales encounter, my recommendations maximize the way our offering satisfies customer needs.	.84	When closing the sales encounter, I routinely recommend the offering that is technically and functionally superior.	.70	When closing the sales encounter, I routinely recommend the offering that has the lowest price.	.64
Reliabilities of stages with regard to higher order construct ^{a)}							
Proposal	.87	Proposal	.88	Proposal	.92	Proposal	.68
Presentation	.96	Presentation	.93	Presentation ^{b)}	.99	Presentation	.82
Discussion	.93	Discussion	.84	Discussion	.98	Discussion	.83
Closing	.95	Closing	.98	Closing	.88	Closing	.90

All items translated from German by the authors. ^{a)} Indicator reliabilities (squared correlational factor loadings, Fornell and Larcker 1981).^{b)}

Appendix B. Items and item reliabilities (IR) for other constructs

Scale	IR ^{a)}
Salesperson performance; expanded from Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann (2011a); seven-point scale with anchors “a lot worse”, “about equal”, and “a lot better”	
How do you evaluate your sales performance in comparison with your colleagues, based on...	
... sales in the last 12 months	.85
... orders in the last 12 months	.84
... total contribution margin in the last 12 months	.71
... sales of new products in the last 12 months	.52
... customer satisfaction	.42
... customer loyalty	.46
Salesperson communication with internal Marketing; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with Marketing on a formal level.	.60
I communicate frequently with Marketing on an informal level	.58
I exchange a lot of information with the Marketing department.	.67
Salesperson communication with internal R&D; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with R&D on a formal level.	.64
I communicate frequently with R&D on an informal level	.65
I exchange a lot of information with the R&D.	.67
Salesperson communication with internal Operations; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with Operations on a formal level.	.68
I communicate frequently with Operations on an informal level.	.74
I exchange a lot of information with Operations.	.50
Salesperson communication with internal Finance; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with Finance on a formal level.	.51
I communicate frequently with Finance on an informal level.	.52
I exchange a lot of information with Finance.	.67
Salesperson communication with customer Purchasing; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with customer employees from Purchasing on a formal level.	.49
I communicate frequently with customer employees from Purchasing on an informal level.	.72
I exchange a lot of information with customer employees from Purchasing.	.74
Salesperson communication with customer R&D; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with customer employees from R&D on a formal level.	.72
I communicate frequently with customer employees from R&D on an informal level.	.84
I exchange a lot of information with customer employees from R&D.	.84
Salesperson communication with customer Operations; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with customer employees from Operations on a formal level.	.69
I communicate frequently with customer employees from Operations on an informal level.	.77
I exchange a lot of information with customer employees from Operations.	.75
Salesperson communication with customer Finance; adapted from Brettel et al. (2011); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I communicate frequently with customer employees from Finance on a formal level.	.77
I communicate frequently with customer employees from Finance on an informal level.	.74
I exchange a lot of information with customer employees from Finance.	.75
Customer orientation; similar to Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann (2011b); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I ask my customers about their specific performance requirements.	.67
I ask direct questions to determine the specific needs of my customers.	.71
In sales conversations, I actively involve my customers to determine their specific needs.	.74
I focus on functional information which is especially relevant for my customers.	.57
I particularly focus on those benefits of our products and services which are of particular relevance for my customers (e.g., cost savings, ease of use, safety etc.).	.60
I adapt my sales pitch very much to my customers’ interests.	.75
When presenting our products and services, I respond very individually to my customers’ requirements.	.72
I talk with my customers about their objections in a detailed manner.	.70
I ask my customers about the reasons behind their objections.	.56
Adaptive selling; adapted from Robinson et al. (2002); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches.	.59
I know how to deal with different customer types.	.76
I know how to act in different sales situations.	.80
Salesperson time allocated to new customer acquisition; open question	
What percentage of time devoted to customers do you spend on acquiring new customers?	n/a
Product customization; taken from Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann (2011b); seven-point Likert scale with anchors “completely disagree” and “completely agree”	
Our products and services are individually developed for our customers.	.60
Our products and services are highly adapted to our customers’ needs.	.93
The major characteristics of our products and services are tailored specifically to our customers.	.75
Product quality focus; five-point semantic differential with anchors “cost leadership” and “quality leadership”	
What strategy does your company follow with its offerings?	n/a

a) Indicator reliabilities (squared correlational factor loadings, Fornell and Larcker 1981).