Embracing the Digital Wave: Navigating Emotional Dynamics in B2B Relationship-Building

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The shift to virtual meetings in B2B contexts, accelerated by recent global changes, including environmental concerns and geopolitical factors, has transformed traditional face-to-face client relationship-building practices. This study delves into how these developments have affected the initial buyer-seller interactions. Through qualitative interviews with 14 experts from both B2B Sales and Purchasing, it employs a qualitative content analysis to evaluate the evolving dynamics. The findings reveal that while relationships remain vital in the sales process, the move to initial virtual meetings introduces challenges such as emotional uncertainty, trust issues, and results in changes in relationship-building strategies. These challenges are significant, especially when the sales process remains entirely digital. However, virtual meetings also offer opportunities for establishing trust and cooperation when approached effectively. The study highlights the importance for sales teams to reassess and adapt their relationship-building techniques for virtual environments. It offers insights into aligning strategies and expectations between sales and purchasing teams in virtual settings, suggesting that addressing the strategic gaps identified could mitigate potential future negative impacts on business relationships.

Track: Sales Management and Personal Selling

Keywords: Virtual Relationship-Building, Buyer-seller relationship, Emotional Dynamics in Sales

1. Introduction

Traditionally, B2B companies have fostered client relationships through face-to-face interactions, with physical encounters serving as a catalyst for building trust and cooperation, leading to relationships based on positive emotions (Candy, Seabrook, and Baird 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in B2B organizations, forcing a shift from traditional to virtual interaction models (Rangarajan et al. 2021). This shift raises questions about the impact of digitalization on the dynamics of business relationships (Hadjikhani and Lindh 2021). While digital technology offers benefits, it also presents potential negative consequences, such as impairing the emotional and relational aspects of sales (Delpechitre, Black, and Farrish 2018). Sales managers are now reliant on virtual tools for managing relationships, significantly decreasing direct physical interactions (Good et al. 2022; Bages-Amat et al. 2020). Research suggests that these changes, resulting in reducing face-to-face meetings, are likely to persist (Standaert, Muylle, and Basu 2021), prompting B2B companies to adapt their relational approach to merge human and digital interactions (Corsaro and D'Amico, 2022).

The relationship between buyer and seller, especially the emotional and relational aspects, has been a cornerstone of B2B transactions, with positive and negative emotions influencing behavior (Andersen and Kumar 2006; Pansari and Kumar 2017). However, less attention has been paid to how relational interactions, particularly initial contacts, have evolved in the digitally accelerated environment.

The evolution of technology has significantly altered the dynamics of buyer-supplier interactions in B2B markets. The rise of the internet and AI-based chatbots has diminished the need for early-stage face-to-face sales interactions, allowing customers to gather product information independently (Bongers, Schumann, and Schmitz 2021; Marcos Cuevas 2018). As a result, buyers now enter meetings with sellers more informed and with heightened expectations (Khandelwal et al. 2021). Virtual meetings, while saving time and increasing productivity by eliminating travel, also bring challenges. They can hinder trust-building and relationship development due to the absence of non-verbal communication (Standaert et al. 2021; Kuzminykh and Rintel 2020; Wiederhold 2020). Furthermore, the shift to digital channels in B2B purchasing requires harmonization of marketing and sales strategies based on unified customer data (Forrester Consulting 2022). Despite this transformation, research on B2B purchasing behavior remains limited (Bonney, Bealer, and Chaker 2022).

2. Literature review

Traditional marketing and sales research have primarily focused on cognitive factors like perceived quality and trust, overlooking the role of affective processes (Pandey and Mookerjee 2018). However, interpersonal relationships, crucial in B2B contexts, involve physiological and sociological factors, including emotions (Andersen and Kumar 2006; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987). Emotional factors, both positive and negative, significantly influence decision-making and buyer-seller relationships (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999; Zehetner et al. 2012).

Salespeople's ability to manage emotional cues is vital for effective sales interactions (Sojka and Deeter-Schmelz 2008; Kaski et al. 2018). Different emotional behavior styles in salespeople, ranging from emotionally artificial to emotionally facilitating, impact buyer-seller interactions differently (Johnson et al. 2021; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). Negative emotions can necessitate crisis management and, in extreme cases, lead to relationship termination (Andersen and Kumar 2006).

Emotions also significantly influence perceptions of trustworthiness, a crucial element in the establishment and maintenance of relationships (McAllister 1995; Forgas 1992). Positive emotional connections can lead to deeper trust levels than those based on predictability alone (Wicks, Berman, and Jones 1999). Salespeople can build rapport by being responsive, collaborative, and sensitive to customers' emotional states, fostering trust and partnership (Kaski et al. 2018). Trust violations can lead to negative emotions and reduced trust, necessitating repair efforts (Tomlinson, Dineen, and Lewicki 2004; Lewicki and Bunker 1996).

While digital transformation in B2B markets offers efficiency and informational advantages, it also presents challenges in building and maintaining effective buyer-seller relationships, underscoring the importance of understanding, and managing the emotional aspects of these interactions. Hadjikhani and Lindh (2021) note that digitalization may lead to uncertainty, countering the potential efficiency gains, while regular digital exchanges can foster predictability and reduce uncertainty. Therefore, the impact of digitalization on business relationships can be complex and varied. Corsaro and D’Amico (2022) introduce the concept of digital trust in B2B relationships, which is influenced by the perception of the digital tools used. Technology that replicates real-life interactions can enhance trust, while reliance on impersonal communication methods like chat can diminish it. In the techno-mediated setting of today's business world, technology is not just a facilitator but a shaper of relationship

dynamics, particularly trust. However, building trust in a digital context, where physical interactions are limited, remains a challenge.

Furthermore, digital communication's lack of nonverbal cues poses challenges in accurately conveying emotions, leading to potential misunderstandings and negative emotions that can damage business relationships. The impersonal nature of digital tools can also hinder the development of strong emotional connections with business partners. Consequently, sales professionals need strong emotional intelligence skills in virtual settings. They must be adept at interpreting subtle cues in digital interactions to understand customers' emotions and needs accurately. Salespeople must adapt their behavior to match the nuanced requirements of digital communication effectively.

Razmak, Pitzel, and Farhan (2022) emphasize the importance of developing the right skillset for salespeople to thrive in a digital business world. The ability to navigate the barriers of digital communication and establish trust and connection with customers is crucial. Salesforces equipped with these skills can enhance customer relationships, turning the challenges of digital settings into opportunities for deeper engagement and partnership.

In summary, the evolution to digital settings in B2B relationships necessitates a nuanced understanding of emotions and trust. While digital tools can facilitate efficiency and predictability, they also bring challenges in conveying emotions and building trust. Success in this digital landscape depends on the ability of sales professionals to adapt, leveraging emotional intelligence to foster strong, trust-based relationships in a predominantly virtual business environment.

3. Methodology

To investigate the scope and dynamics of emotions between buyers and sellers, we pursue qualitative research. Expert interviews are suitable for this study as they enable the collection of a broad range of information, including personal experiences, emotions, and opinions, which are crucial to understanding individual perceptions in business relationships (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2012; Hennink et al. 2011).

Despite some criticisms of expert interviews as being merely "informational" and secondary in methodological significance (Lamnek 2010; Liebold and Trinczek 2009), this research method offers several advantages. It utilizes semi-structured interviews, allowing for predefined questions while also giving interviewees the freedom to respond openly. This format is flexible enough to adapt to the flow of the conversation, omit certain questions

based on the organizational context, and address unplanned topics as they arise (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2012; Gläser and Laudel 2010).

For participant selection, a non-probability self-selection method was employed due to the lack of a common sampling frame for all B2B salespeople and buyers. Participants were chosen based on self-selected criteria and then contacted individually. The expert selection process involved using LinkedIn to identify candidates working in the B2B sector, with specific job titles or experience related to sales or purchasing.

Table 1. Study participants.

ID	Category	Position	Industry
S1	Sales	Sales Director	Medical Technology Industry
S2	Sales	B2B Sales Consultant	Consulting Industry + previous experience in Banking
S3	Sales	Director Sales and Marketing	Films and Nonwovens Manufacturing Industry I Hygiene Sector
S4	Sales	B2B Sales Consultant	Consulting Industry
S5	Sales	Team Lead B2B Sales	IT Wholesale Trade Industry
S6	Sales	Head of B2B Sales	Wholesale Trade Industry I Food Sector
S7	Sales	Head of B2B Sales	Wholesale Trade Industry I Food Sector
B1	Buying	Commodity Buyer	Automotive Industry
B2	Buying	Lead Buyer	Vehicle Manufacturing Industry
B3	Buying	Technical Buyer	Energy Industry
B4	Buying	Strategic Buyer	Transport and Logistics Industry
B5	Buying	Corporate Buyer	Textile Industry
B6	Buying	Purchasing Manager	Automotive Industry
B7	Buying	Category Buyer	Pharmaceutical Industry

The 14 interviews were conducted between March 20th and March 31st, 2023, and lasted from 45 to 62 minutes. The conversations took place online (Zoom or Microsoft Teams) and were recorded using the platform's built-in recording function, as well as an additional audio recording using a smartphone as backup. Most interviews were conducted in German, as the participants felt more comfortable talking in their native language.

4. Findings

Both buyers and sellers acknowledge the crucial role of buyer-seller relationships in business success. Buyers benefit from established relationships through fair pricing, better

cooperation, and support for personalized products. These relationships also lead to smoother processes, flexibility, and joint innovation support. In conflicts, established suppliers provide better resolution. For buyers in the automotive industry, these relationships are essential due to dependency on specific parts and complex purchasing procedures.

Suppliers, on the other hand, place even greater emphasis on the importance of these relationships, using terms like "essential for survival" (S7) and "it is key" (S3). S5 highlights the role of salespeople as “problem-solvers, building trust through reliability and support” (S5). S6 enjoys building interpersonal relationships, emphasizing informal interactions and shared activities like dining, or attending sports events to strengthen bonds (S6).

The initial touchpoint in the sales process varies by industry. In the pharmaceutical industry, it often occurs during the offering phase, while in the automotive industry, it happens during the prospecting phase due to the technical nature of products. The point of initial contact can also depend on the buying procedure, such as during tender processes or new concept development (B3). The timing of the initial meeting is crucial, as early involvement often leads to more successful solutions (B2). Sellers prioritize quick personal contact, usually during the qualification phase (S6; S7).

Buyers and sellers perceive the importance of the initial meeting differently. Buyers view it as an intermediate step in relationship building, emphasizing “continuity over first impressions” (B7). Sellers, however, deem it crucial for establishing rapport and making a positive first impression, which significantly influences business outcomes (S7; S6). Digital transformation has led to a shift from face-to-face to virtual first meetings. While this change saves time and increases efficiency, some experts express a desire to return to in-person meetings for initial contacts (B4; B2). Virtual meetings offer flexibility and cost savings but can lack the personal connection of physical meetings. They allow for quick coordination among colleagues during the meeting, an advantage not present in face-to-face settings (B1; B7).

Most buyers consider the first meeting to be less important for the relationship and consider it more as an intermediate step in the process of building a relationship. Buyer B7 comments as follows: "I think people often make a big fuss about it. But I don't think it's that important. What is important is the continuity of the work. I think the first impression is something that is very hyped. I wouldn't attach quite as much importance to the first impression as others might.” (B7). Similarly, another buyer mentions that the first meeting should not be the sole determinant of the relationship (B4). According to interviewee B3, the initial meeting between a buyer and seller is “merely an intermediate step towards

establishing a potential partnership. It is only through the course of time that it becomes apparent whether the relationship will be successful or not" (B3). The interviewee B3 notes that over the years, only a few sellers have remained memorable due to their uniqueness during the first meeting and „a seller may easily be forgotten and replaced" (B3). The buyers note that a first meeting may be challenging from a personality perspective, but "a successful collaboration could still occur at a later point in time with a different salesperson" (B1).

In contrast, all salespeople emphasize the great importance of the first meeting by using phrases such as "it is key" (S3), or "it is the crucial conversation" (S2). Seller S7 points out that "there is no second chance for a first impression. (…) the customer often decides based on the first impression" (S7). S6 notes that "the first meeting sets the tone for future interactions and allows sellers to assess the personality and communication style of the buyer" (S6). According to S2 "within the first ten minutes, the buyer has decided if they want to continue with the salesperson or not" (S2). Consequently, salespeople look for clues in the buyer's office or surroundings to establish common ground and create an emotional connection (S2). Sales expert S6 points out that "at the first meeting, you get the first impression, and that must be confirmed in the further course. But after the first meeting, you can say what kind of people they are, and that's what we're trained for." (S6).

A negative first impression can be difficult to overcome and can even lead to the buyer avoiding any further interactions with the seller. Participant S4 notes that "if I don't like the other person in the first conversation and l judge the person as not competent or, I don't like them, then l will avoid a second conversation or l will avoid further interactions at all. I think that's exactly the same in every aspect of life. And it's the same with Sales. Or it clicks and then I have a big advantage" (S4).

Emotional intelligence on both sides becomes even more important to accurately evaluate and respond to this new situation. Two experts state that interpreting emotions quickly becomes misleading in virtual settings. According to interviewee B2, "a comparison can be made between a digital conversation and a face-to-face conversation and an email and a phone call. In an email, the content is read, but the sender's intention may be misinterpreted, leading to misunderstandings. On the other hand, in a phone call, the tone of voice can reveal the sender's intent more accurately, leading to fewer misunderstandings. This is similar to the difference between a digital and face-to-face exchange, where the latter allows for a more present emotional tone" (B2). Expert S4 adds that in a virtual setting, "the lack of visual cues such as facial expressions and gestures, combined with the possibility of distractions and reduced attention, can also be misleading" (S4).

Interestingly, there appears to be a notable absence of reflection on the part of both expert groups with regards to emotional factors and their changes in virtual environments. This is evident from the frequent occurrence of hesitancy and ambiguous remarks. They struggle to provide definitive answers regarding emotional changes in virtual environments, stating that it is “a difficult question to answer” (S7), a “good question” (B4) or “hard to say” (B7).

5. Discussion

To summarize the findings, two conceptual frameworks were developed following Gioia's et al. (2013) proposal for data structuring in expert interviews. Emotional Uncertainty is based on the issues that in virtual meetings, there is a lack of both Emotional and Visual Cues. According to the participants, it is harder to interpret body language, gestures, and mimics on camera. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to assess the counterpart9s emotional reactions and adapt accordingly to it. Additionally, the interactions tend to be more rational and factual, and it is not possible to create a personal connection similar to the one in in-person meetings. Salespeople struggle with the challenge that in virtual interactions there are fewer opportunities for small talk, through which an initial personal connection can be established, since the physical environment is absent. These leads to virtual meetings creating greater uncertainty in terms of emotions and, consequently, also strategy, as the lack of emotional assessment means that the usual strategy can no longer be implemented in the same way. This has a particularly negative impact on first meetings because there is usually no prior experience or knowledge about the behavior or potential reactions of the counterpart. According to the experts, this poses a particular challenge for sales, as they rely on establishing a personal connection from the first moment onwards.

The second dimension, Impairment of Trust-Building, has been extracted analyzing how trust between buyer and seller is in general created and how virtual settings impact the process of building trust. The presence of positive factors as well as the absence of negative factors lead to a feeling of trust towards the other party. However, the theme Lack of Personal Connection negatively affects the trust-building process in digital settings. The experts state that it is more difficult to assess the sincerity of promises and actions made digitally. Secondly, virtual first meetings can lead to a Perceived Lack of Commitment on both sides. According to the experts, it is easier to organize many digital meetings because the organizational and time constraints are comparatively smaller. However, as a result, less importance is attached to them, as they lose perceived importance due to their frequent

occurrence and strong integration into everyday business. Since this can generally be observed on both sides, and the experts are aware of it, it can lead to doubts being raised about the commitment of the counterpart. The last theme within this dimension, Negative Behavioral Changes in Virtual Settings, also has negative implications for the creation of trust. The experts have noticed a tendency towards bolder behavior because of an in- creased sense of anonymity and consequently a lower inhibition threshold.

The third dimension Deficits in Relationship-Building Approach was derived from the challenges in the relationship-building process. All experts state that in their industries, relationships between buyer and seller are especially important and they also put high importance on the existence of those relationships in the future. While they acknowledge that emotions in general, and especially the presence of positive emotions, are important, responses to questions in this context sometimes suggest a lack of reflection. Notably, some experts lack awareness of the behavioral shifts that take place during virtual meetings, including changes in both the counterpart and the experts themselves. The main issue at hand is that these behavioral changes, such as lack of attention, mental absence, or bolder behavior, have negative connotations and thus trigger the negative emotional reaction in the counterpart that should be avoided. As a result, not only are positive emotional reactions harder to achieve due to the lack of personal connection, but the likelihood of negative reactions is higher compared to in-person meetings. These aspects are summarized in the theme Emotional and Behavioral Unawareness.

Lastly, there seems to be an Insufficient Buyer-Seller Match. On the one hand, the experts largely agree that both sides have similar views on future expectations and developments. This may be true in the long term and can neither be confirmed nor refuted with the present research data. On the other hand, the statements on the importance of the first meeting and about valued emotional aspects suggest otherwise. Sellers tends to attach more importance to the initial meeting than the purchasing side. While all participants from the seller group consider the initial meeting to be very important, only two buyers agree with them. Most buyers consider the first meeting to be less important for the relationship and see it more as an intermediate step in the process of building the relationship. They also focus on technical aspects such as the product match. Positive emotional experiences are created by attention, interest, and good preparation on the part of the supplier. On the seller side, a lot of emphasis is placed on the personal level, making a good first impression on the customer, and the possibility of establishing a connection.

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