Educational selling: a constructivist departure from mainstream selling

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Abstract:

In today's competitive enterprise sales environment, a company's value largely depends on generating recurring revenues and retaining customers. This reality elevates the sales function beyond mere transaction facilitation. This paper argues that people engaged in sales could improve their long-term sales performance and the business performance of their customers if they adopt the practice of customer education. This sales approach is referred to as *educational selling* and can contribute to the existing sales theories. Constructivist learning theory is used as an educational background theory to develop the concept of educational selling. Semi-structured, exploratory interviews with professional salespersons and buyers were conducted to investigate the feasibility of the concept. The results suggest that educational methods used in sales are already broadly applied and highly effective, as evidenced by positive perceptions from both the sales representatives and the customers.

Keywords: educational selling, sales management, constructivism

Track: Sales Management and Personal Selling

1. Introduction

The success of enterprise B2B companies is increasingly measured by their ability to generate recurring revenues and maintain customer retention. This elevates the sales function beyond facilitating transactions to a critical role in ensuring customer proficiency in using purchased products and services (Chao et al., 2017; Prohl & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020). A gap in traditional enterprise sales approaches is their focus on inter-organizational strategies, often overlooking the interpersonal and educational aspects necessary for customer readiness and competence in service utilization.

Our research explores *educational selling*, a concept not extensively examined in sales literature. Educational selling regards customer teaching and training as essential activities of the sales process and not only of the after-sales process (e.g., Damali et al., 2016; Shen & Tang, 2018). The thinking behind the concept is based on the logic of value co-creation, which should dominate buyer-seller interaction practices (Hartmann et al., 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2018). As Hibbert et al. (2012, p. 247) suggest, "customers must acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to be effective resource integrators as they engage in activities that facilitate or create value." Thus, the role of a salesperson in teaching customers requires explicit attention.

We apply constructivist learning theories (e.g., Driscoll, 2000; Bada & Olusegun, 2015) to understand how educating customers could improve the sales process. Through 40 interviews in the enterprise service sector with both salespersons and buyers, we investigate educational selling's requirements, methods, and goals, aiming to lay out the theoretical premises of the concept and to understand how it differs from other sales approaches. The paper provides some empirical evidence that educational selling can enhance a firm's sales performance by fostering a more holistic, customer-centric approach with some constructivist educational elements. Finally, we offer practical recommendations for its implementation in enterprise sales management.

2. Conceptual background

2.1 Constructivist learning theory

During the 1980s and 1990s, a pivotal era for modern sales methodologies like consultative and solution selling, there was also a profound transformation in the principles and practices of teaching and learning. One of the most important changes is the notion that teachers cannot simply transmit knowledge to students, but students need to actively construct knowledge, which means discovering, revising, and transforming information in relation to their existing knowledge (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). According to this constructivist view of learning, a learner is an active agent in the process of knowledge acquisition, and the view has had remarkable impacts on what 'teaching' is thought to mean and entail (Driscoll, 2000; Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

One of the most important shifts the constructivist view of learning has generated is the idea of student-centered learning, as opposed to teacher-centered learning, which highlights the understanding of the student's existing skills and knowledge, setting of learning objectives and assessment criteria that the student knows and accepts, as well as students' active learning and participation (Krahenbuhl, 2016; Torrance, 2007; Wright, 2011). Constructivist student-centered learning aims to tap into the student's curiosity and create premises for them to build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning (Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

The constructivist view has become particularly prominent after the explosion of information that can be found online. Students now face an endless stream of scattered and continuously updated information online. In such a situation, students' prior knowledge, conceptions of the domain to be learned, and conceptions of the learning assignment play a key role in affecting the kind of information students retrieve and the kind of knowledge they construct (Halttunen, 2003). The teacher is, therefore, not a gatekeeper to information but a curator or supporter of the student's ability to find and interpret relevant information. Some core components of constructivism are listed in Table 1.

Learner-centred approach	Constructivism emphasizes that learning is an active, personal process where learners construct their understanding based on their experiences and prior knowledge (Arends, 1998; Elliott et al., 2000).
Social interaction and collaboration	Constructivist learning is greatly influenced by social interactions, where learners share, negotiate, and refine their understanding of concepts through collaborative dialogue and problem-solving (Aminah & Asl, 2015).
Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)	This principle, introduced by Lev Vygotsky, refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. Constructivist learning activities aim to engage learners within their Zone of Proximal Development (Harland, 2003; Aminah & Asl, 2015).
Scaffolding	In scaffolding, instructors and peers provide temporary support, guidance, and resources that help learners build on their existing knowledge and gradually achieve more complex understanding (Roehler et al., 1997; Melero et al., 2012).
Multiple perspectives	Constructivist learning environments encourage learners to consider repeated diverse perspectives and interpretations, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Fosnot, 2013).
Problem-based learning	Constructivist education encourages learners to engage with real-world problems and explore solutions by promoting critical and problem-based thinking (Hendry et al., 1999; Kemp, 2011).
Reflection and metacognition	In constructivism, learners are encouraged to reflect on their learning processes, evaluate their understanding, and develop metacognitive strategies to enhance their learning experience (Amin & Mariani, 2017).
Authentic assessment	Constructivist assessment focuses on evaluating learners' understanding, skills, and knowledge application in real-world contexts rather than relying solely on standardized tests (Scholz, 2007).

Table 1. Constructivism core components

2.2 Sales approaches to support value co-creation

Sales management literature acknowledges the role of a salesperson as an actor who seeks to enable and amplify value co-creation instead of merely persuading customers to buy (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Cuevas, 2018). The most prominent approaches that highlight the relationship between sales work, value co-creation, and the utilization of high-level knowledge can be argued to be value-based selling, solution selling, and consultative selling.

Value-based selling involves translating an offering's benefits into monetary terms via understanding the customer's business model and logic. Typical methods of value-based selling include the use of value calculations or reference cases that, beyond the salesperson's persona or communication skills, demonstrate how the sold service benefits the customer's business (Terho et al., 2012.) The downside could be overlooking 'soft' value drivers or overestimating the customer's service usage (Pöyry et al., 2021).

Solution selling customizes products and services to customer problems, often utilizing value-based selling principles to maximize value creation (Liinamaa et al., 2016; Luotola et al., 2017). As solutions need to solve specifically identified customer problems, their composition varies between customer cases. Therefore, salespersons need relational capabilities to be able to orchestrate and manage the interaction between all the (often task-dedicated) parties involved in the implementation of the solution (Storbacka et al., 2011).

Consultative selling gives information and guidance to customers, emphasizing a salesperson's expertise and trustworthiness fostering credibility and value beyond customer procurement capabilities (Liu & Leach, 2001). Key factors in this approach are the salesperson's expertise and trustworthiness in the eyes of the customer, which together form the perceived overall credibility of the salesperson

While these approaches consider some educational elements, they don't explicitly focus on the salesperson as a key actor in enhancing the customer's use or internal management of the sold service. More attention is needed to increase customers' skills, knowledge, and capabilities in value co-creation and pre-deal sales activities.

3. Research method

3.1 Data collection

In order to investigate the current application and future feasibility of educational selling approaches, semi-structured, exploratory interviews with both B2B salespersons and buyers were conducted. The interviewees were from Finnish companies from various industries (e.g., IT, consultancy, manufacturing, marketing). In total, 40 interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in 2022 and 2023 using video meeting software, and they were recorded with the interviewee's permission.

On the sales side, the semi-structured interviews focused on the interviewees' sales practices and how possible elements of educational selling emerged in their work based on the central components of constructivism. On the buyers' side, the interviews focused on their buying processes and how the possible elements of educational selling have been viewed from their perspective. For both groups, in addition to general background questions about the participant's role and position in the organization, the interview questions and themes considered: 1) Prerequisites for successful exchange (i.e., knowledge and interaction prerequisites for learning, 2) Procedures and outcomes (critical reflection, methodic approaches and expected outcomes), 3) Interaction and exchange (initiatives, adaptations to subject's abilities).

3.2 Analysis and reliability

The interview transcripts were analyzed following the systematic inductive approach of Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). The Gioia methodology includes three steps of data aggregation to find patterns among the data: first-order analysis, second-order analysis, and aggregated terms. In the first-order analysis, informant-centric terms are in focus with no attempt to distill categories, and at this stage, we focused particularly on goals, methods, and requirements of educational selling. During the second-order analysis, the categories are reduced and labeled. After the first and second-order analysis, it is investigated whether the emerging second-order themes can be distilled to aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013).

4. Results

In this chapter, the findings are categorized into four categories to depict the proposed educational sales strategy: goals, methods, requirements and challenges of educational selling. Table 2 summarizes the findings with respondent quote examples, conclusions and constructivism approaches that were found to correspond to the themes.

4.1 Goals of educational selling

Salespersons noted that one should guide the buyer through the sales process. Often, the salesperson works together with the client, offering support during each stage of the sales process. According to the analysis, guiding the buyer gets more engaged to explore how the product or service will solve their problems. In addition, salespersons noted that educational selling might mean educating the client to buy, use and create additional value with a product or service.

4.2 Methods of educational selling

The identified practical methods used for educating customers were, for example, the use of blogs, product or service demos, use case descriptions and webinars. They provide an opportunity for customers to engage with real-world examples building their understanding and establishing connections with existing knowledge on how the solution would work in their own context. In addition, it was mentioned that educational materials not only support buyers' understanding and application of the service but also help them use it. Both counterparts also stressed the importance of listening, understanding and asking questions. Empathy and active listening are critical for salespeople to understand the perspectives and challenges of the customer. Buyers also noted the use of consultants as support when buying and buying from trusted networks. Social proof, in the form of testimonials, trusted recommendations, or even third-party consultants, plays a vital role in fostering learning and motivating sales decisions.

4.3 Requirements

Among the salespersons' responses good communication and social skills were thought to be the backbone of facilitating an active, social learning process, aiding the friendly exchange and negotiation of ideas. For learners to construct their understanding based on experiences and prior knowledge, they need to be active, open-minded, and willing to participate.

The salespersons need to be aware of the client's knowledge level and that the customers learning process takes time as learners iteratively build on their knowledge and understanding through experiences and interactions The educational selling works particularly well when selling to a low-knowledge client, i.e. building on prior knowledge and personalizing learning to guide the customer into purchasing.

Buyer respondents stressed trust as it is crucial for fostering a safe environment that promotes open discourse and collaborative problem-solving. In addition, many of the buyers noted that the more one knows, the wiser purchases they are able to make. Many buyers also wished that salespersons did their background research and homework: knowing more about the client allows the salesperson to tailor their approach according to the customer's unique needs. Buyers also hoped that the salesperson would use a structured presentation, where well-structured information supports buyers' understanding. Lastly, buyers noted that they respect a seller who advises pragmatically and tells what to buy and what not to buy.

4.4 Challenges of educational selling

Many salespersons thought that one should avoid product-centric selling. This highlights the importance of personalizing the sales approach according to the client's needs.

Buyers also noted that sometimes there are unethical selling experiences. This statement could be related to a breach in trusting relationships. If the salesperson tries to sell something the buyer does not need, they are straying away from the learner-centred approach. Instead, salesperson should encourage buyers to reflect their learning and understanding to address their real needs.

	Salesperson quote examples	**Buyer quote examples**	**Conclusions**	**Constructivism approaches**
Goals	"In service sales, we guide and teach a lot" "We went through this other solution, and I trained him, taught him hands-on, showed, shared the screen to say, hey, we have such a solution, which would fit better to this use case"		Salesperson as a guide in social situation teaching how to buy, use and create additional value with a product or service.	-Scaffolding -Problem based learning -Learner-centred approach
Methods	"As a salesperson, if you do educational selling, meaning that you are teaching your prospect buyer about a certain subject, you need to have a good-quality content available."	"(When buying), The importance of recommendations and networks really stands out constantly. "The old classic saying that a good salesperson has 2 ears, and one mouth is quite relevant; there are certain types who can't really stop to listen to what the customer's need might be."	Use of blogs, demos, use case descriptions, webinar etc. Empathy, active listening, asking questions and social proof as factors motivating and fostering learning.	-Scaffolding -Problem based learning -Social interaction and collaboration
Requirements	"It takes time to teach, and whenever the product or the platform is new, it is even more time consuming." "(Eduselling requires) a willingness to learn new"	"(If you have the knowledge) you can think about your own sales process through the customer's buying process."	Personality traits: interest, active, receptivity, willingness to learn, and open-mindedness. Trustful, personalized, well-structured, and pragmatic approaches.	-Learner-centred approach -Multiple perspectives -ZPD -Scaffolding -Problem based learning -Social interaction and collaboration -Authentic assessment
Challenges	"Novice salespeople who start out in sales for the first time, especially with new technology, often have a certain uncertainty about the technology itself, which leads them to focus on technical aspects, and these may not necessarily bring much added value to the customer."	"We wanted to buy a certain package from the supplier, and they wanted to use that to forcibly get into a different kind of work. Then they tried to, against our will, turn our technology strategy a bit in the direction that would allow them to sell their own thing".	Avoidance of product-centric selling and unethical approaches, personalizing the offers.	-Learner-centred approach -Reflections and metacognitions

Table 2. Summary of results with respondent quote examples, conclusions and emerged constructivism approaches.

5. Discussion and managerial implications

This paper introduced the components of constructivism as defined and applied in the education literature. Based on our empirical findings, we refine these components as they occur in educational selling.

Personalize the sales approach. Recognizing that each customer has unique needs, experiences, and knowledge. It is important to tailor the sales pitch and speech to buyer's individual context, emphasizing the relevance of the product or service to their specific situation. Complementing an understanding of a customer's existing knowledge, it is critical to provide corresponding information and supportive aids to guide customers through their buying process. This process emphasizes the need to implement adaptive strategies such as offering product demonstrations in response to a customer's expressed need for more tangible knowledge. This is strongly related to the component of scaffolding in constructivism, in which knowledge is built upon an individual's prior knowledge (Elliott et al., 2000). Furthermore, tailoring the sales strategy also leverages the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. This concept suggests the ideal state for a learner to be in during instruction, enhancing the effectiveness of the teaching process (Harland, 2003).

Active listening and empathy. Engaging in meaningful conversations with customers, focusing on understanding their perspectives, challenges, and aspirations. This allows better understanding of their needs and concerns. In sales theory, listening is both a way to uncover the information needed to personalize (Itani et al., 2019) and a way to make interaction efficient and build relationships (Drollinger et al., 2013). What is underappreciated is that for buyers to internalize, learn and move forward in their thought processes, they need to talk and preferably lecture or teach about the issue at hand.

Social proof. The application of social learning mechanisms, such as testimonials, case studies, and references from satisfied customers, plays a significant role within effective sales strategies. This approach draws upon the influential power of social proof, whereby individuals tend to mirror the actions of those they perceive as similar or relatable. The incorporation of social learning within a sales strategy can then serve as a critical instrument for bridging the information gap faced by potential customers. The concept of social interactions and collaboration as discussed in constructivism (Aminah & Asl, 2015), underpins the use of social learning in a sales strategy, providing a vital tool to close the informational divide often encountered by prospective consumers.

Collaborative problem-solving. Work with the customer to identify their pain points and explore how your product or service can provide solutions. Encourage customers to participate actively in the decision-making process. Similar to social proof, this also echoes the element of social interaction inherent in constructivism (Aminah & Asl, 2015).

Encourage reflection. Encouraging a customer to critically reflect on their needs, specific goals, and potential outcomes that could stem from the use of a product or service, catalyzes an inward-focused, customer-centric dialogue. This encourages customers to assimilate the value proposition, aiding them in making a more knowledgeable and, ultimately, gratifying purchasing decision, an approach originating from the reflection and metacognition components of constructivism (Amin & Mariani, 2017).

Authentic assessment. The utilization of real-world examples and demonstrations plays a foundational role in portraying the practical benefits and applications of a product or service. Merely relying on abstract claims or statistical proof may alienate customers if they struggle to contextualize this information to their specific circumstances. Showcasing tangible applications aids the translation of product features into concrete benefits, resonating more deeply with customers. Examples and demonstrations reveal how the product or service operates in a context that is similar to the customers' own, thereby creating a relatable narrative. This refers to the authentic assessment -component of constructivism, where learner's skills are evaluated in real life, rather than standardised tests (Scholz, 2007).

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