

Understanding Value Creation through Digital and In-Person Communication in Solution Selling Process

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Abstract

This study investigates how value is created from a customer relationship perspective when a seller employs both digital and in-person communications. Through a phenomenological study, we interpret data from 33 interviews and 15 video recordings of B2B solution sellers and customers. We contribute to the existing literature by showing the value of communication for sales relationships when a salesperson uses both digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process. While digital sales communication is often based on the seller's task-specific management, in-person communication is mainly based on the seller's relational orientation towards a profitable relationship. Furthermore, the closer the relationship between the seller and the customer, the greater the requirement is for salespeople to create value in communication by combining digital and in-person sales interactions. As for the managerial implications, companies should create a sales communication strategy built around value creation in relationships by focusing on sales communication competence.

Keywords:

B2B sales relationships; Value Creation; Digital communication; In-person communication; B2B solution selling process

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1. Introduction

New technology has led to rapid and revolutionary changes in the traditional sales process (Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, & Lee, 2012). Nowadays, the sales function includes more divergent demands than ever (Cuevas, 2018; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018) and the current environment highlights the need to explore alternative sales communications (Chuang, 2020; Koponen, Julkunen, & Asai, 2019; Ancillai et al., 2019). While global changes (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) have led to unexpected changes in B2B sales and the creation of value has increasingly depended upon engaging actors via digital communications (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018), the need for in-person communication is still a part of the solution selling process. The importance of digital and in-person communications has also been emphasized among sales organisations (State of Sales, 2020), resulting in the need to explore how value creation is produced when sales professionals use appropriate digital and in-person communications. Today in 2022, the pandemic has forced nearly all businesses towards virtual selling as in-person meetings carry an unnecessary risk of spreading the disease. As a result, more sales organizations are examining how to make these virtual interactions as valuable as possible.

In this study, we adopted Grönroos's (2011, 2008) definition of value in which customers [and sellers] are or feel better off than before after having been assisted by the provisions of resource or interactive processes. In a B2B solution selling context, such a definition includes the effects on (1) the customer's [and seller's] growth- and revenue-generating capacity, (2) the customer's [and seller's] cost level, and (3) the effects on perceptions, such as trust, commitment, comfort, or attraction. This definition is consistent with other B2B researchers who define value creation as a shared, interactive process whose goal is to deliver value for both partners (Viio & Grönroos, 2014), identify the importance of customer relationships (Panagopoulos et al., 2017), and understand solution selling processes (Eggert et al., 2018; Keränen & Liouzu, 2020). Because the solution selling process can be considered a relational process (Panagopoulos et al., 2017; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007), communication is also seen as critical for building and maintaining relationships in B2B solution selling and as a key element in creating value in the customer-seller relationship (Koponen et al., 2019; Ancillai et al., 2019).

Focusing on communication, several terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the industry. Interpersonal communication occurs in the sales settings between two people or a small group of people (Koponen et al., 2019). In *in-person communications*, a salesperson and buyer meet in the same location, and both verbal and nonverbal messages can be fully transmitted, and interpreted. Mulhern (2009) defined *digital communication* as the employment of modern digital channels to create an integrated communication process that helps firms acquire and retain customers while establishing strong relationships. Bharadwaj & Shipley (2020, p. 107) defined *digital sales interaction* as technology-enabled face-to-face buyer-seller exchanges. In this scenario, buyers and sellers are in different locations and meet remotely via a screen-to-screen interface (Kopalle, Kumar & Subramaniam, 2019). Digital sales interaction tools are tools that enable synchronous interaction via video connection (e.g., Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, GoTo Meeting, Google Meet) or online chatting with video (e.g., WhatsApp, Messenger with video). *Digital sales communication tools* enable synchronous and asynchronous communication (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). These tools involve emails, websites, search engine optimization, (Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson, & Pullins, 2020), phone, text messages, and online text-based chatting (e.g., WhatsApp, Messenger, Google Hangouts without video). Lastly, we are choosing to use the expression in-person rather than face-to-face to reflect meetings that occur when all parties are in the same room or vicinity. We make this distinction because, while digital com-

munications technically occur face-to-screen, it is, for all intents and purposes, face-to-face.

Regardless of the communication medium, salespeople need sales communication competence to behave appropriately, effectively, and ethically in professional sales communication settings (Koponen et al., 2019). This competence includes four dimensions as Koponen, et al., (2019) defined: cognitive communication including knowledge on communication, cultural knowledge, metacognition; affective communication involving motivation, positive and open attitude, cultural sensitivity; behavioural communication focusing on relational communication skills, personal selling skills, and language skills; sales acumen based on a strategic understanding of B2B sales and leadership skills.

Previously, solution selling had been described as a process that is interconnected and iterative and that encapsulates the dynamic between customer and seller (e.g., Storbacka, 2011; Panagopoulos et al., 2017). Yet, while the whole sales process can be built via digital channels, using digital communications exclusively can strip much of the meaningfulness of the interaction. For instance, non-verbal communication, outside work interaction, and informal discussion are limited during a digital sales meeting. In particular, international solution sellers stress the role of engagement (State of Sales, 2020) that is often developed in face-to-face meetings. However, previous studies have not investigated the value of sales communication for customers and sellers in a B2B context. Therefore, we address the following research question: within the B2B solution selling process - how is value created from a seller and customer perspective when the seller employs both digital and in-person communications?

2. Theoretical Background

In the following theoretical background, we analyze earlier sales research and focus on the following themes: value creation in solution selling, the solution selling process, and interpersonal sales communication. Additionally, we present in Table 1 our justification for why our study is needed based on the gaps in earlier research. Next, we further elaborate on the previous literature and our positioning against it.

Table 1. Positioning of the earlier research.

LITERATURE REVIEW IN THEMES	VALUE CREATION IN SOLUTION SELLING	B2B SOLUTION SELLING PROCESS	INTERPERSONAL SALES COMMUNICATION
Understanding multiple value approaches and to focus on the customer (Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012; Keränen & Liouzu, 2020; Payne, Frow, & Egger, 2017; Terho et al., 2017).	X		
Understanding customer value for customers assisted by the provision of better resources or beneficial interactive processes, such as effects on customer's growth and revenue-generating capacity, customer's cost level, and influence on perceptions (e.g., trust, commitment, comfort, or attraction). (Grönroos, 2011)	X		
Conceptualization of value-based selling in three dimensions: 1) sellers' efforts to understand the customer's business model, 2) crafting the value proposition, 3) communicating the quantified value-in-use potential (Terho et al., 2012).	X		

Interconnected and iterative phases of B2B solution selling process. A link between the process itself and the relational aspect that strengthens the role of the salesperson. The focus on uncertainty reduction and adaptiveness (Ulaga & Kohli, 2018).		X	
The importance of a seller's role in solution building (Evanschitzky et al., 2011; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014) and relationship development (Chaker, Zablah, & Noblec, 2018; Marshall, Goebel, & Moncrief, 2003).		X	
Communication produces value in the relationship between a customer and a seller (Koponen et al., 2019; Ancillai et al., 2019)	X		X
Digitalization offers several ways that new technologies can affect interpersonal sales communication (Andzulis et al., 2012; Chuang, 2020; Cuevas, 2018).			X
A need to explore value creation in the customer relationships when the seller employs both digital and in-person communications during the B2B solution selling process (Our study).	X	X	X

2.1 Value creation in solution selling

The value creation perspective of B2B sales research underlines an integrated theoretical background, from sales to customer orientation (Grönroos, 2011; Terho et al., 2017; Terho et al., 2015; Terho et al., 2012). Indeed, the previous literature also shows it is necessary to understand multiple value approaches and the need to focus on the customer (Haas et al., 2012; Payne et al., 2017; Terho et al., 2017). Grönroos (2011) defines value as the benefit for customers who are assisted by the provision of better resources or beneficial interactive processes. Examples include the effects on customer growth and revenue-generating capacity, customer's cost level, and effects on perceptions (e.g., trust, commitment, comfort, or attraction). Because a firm's continued objective is to communicate value to customers (Terho et al., 2017; Keränen & Liouzu, 2020), solution sellers must understand how customers react to value creation (Arndt, Karande, & Harkins, 2012), while also considering the demands on resources for individual salespeople (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014). Therefore, value creation is understood from the perspectives of both the seller and the customer in this study.

In the earlier B2B research, value-based selling is conceptualized in three dimensions: 1) the sellers' efforts to understand the customer's business model, 2) crafting the value proposition, and 3) communicating the quantified value-in-use potential (Terho et al. 2012). This means that value-based selling picks out the perspectives of a customer and a seller as well as recognizes the value of communication. Unlike our study, such value-based selling, however, focuses on the communication of monetary value (e.g., tailored offerings). Based on the crucial role of relationship building in solution selling (Panagopoulos et al., 2017; Chuang, 2020; Eggert, Ulaga, Frow, & Payne, 2018; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018), we identified a need to explore value creation from the perspective of a customer and a seller when the seller employs both digital and in-person communications during the B2B solution selling process.

2.2. Solution selling process

Previously, solution selling was described as a process of interconnected and iterative nature involving the dynamics between a customer and a seller (e.g., Storbacka, 2011; Panagopoulos et al., 2017). For instance, Kindström and Kowalkowski (2009) suggest a four-step solution process comprising market sensing, development of sales, sales, and delivery. Storbacka (2011) proposes four highly interconnecting and iterative categories in a solution selling process: de-

veloping solutions, creating demand, selling the solution, and delivering the solution. Ulaga and Kohli (2018) present the stages of requirements and definition, customization and integration, deployment, and post-deployment support. They recognize the role of uncertainties of customer's needs, process uncertainty, and uncertainty related to outcomes during the solution selling process. Moreover, the ability of both parties to adapt their behavior was crucial.

The earlier sales research identifies varying demands in the different stages of the solution selling process as well as a relational aspect. Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp (2007) discuss the importance of relational capital in the solution process: If a salesperson made the exchange valuable for the customer, it drove superior sales performance. The importance of a salesperson in successful sales (Evanschitzky et al., 2011; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014) is also identified with a strong link between the process itself and the relational aspect (Ulaga & Kohli, 2018) that strengthens the role of the salesperson as a manager of a sales process, solution builder, and relationship developer.

During the solution selling process, a salesperson uses their expertise, supported by their experience and capabilities, to discover the interests that they share with the customer (Wood et al., 2008). The salesperson is expected to identify unique customer requirements effectively, combine goods and services in a firm's product portfolio strategically, integrate products with valuable resources and technical expertise, and support the delivery of solutions to customers (Haas et al., 2012; Töllner, Blut, & Holzmüller, 2011). Hence, a seller's expertise supports a customer's belief that the salesperson has sufficient technical skills and knowledge to ensure that the sales process will achieve their mutual interests (Koponen et al., 2019).

For building a successful solution selling process, the salesperson must be persistent with sales tactics and have the political aptitude, customer orientation, listening proficiency, follow-up skills, and ability to adapt an appropriate sales approach to meet the customer's expectations (Nawar, Zablah, & Noblec, 2018; Marshall et al., 2003). Consequently, the solution-selling process can be viewed as a method in which a customer and a seller jointly participate in supporting their businesses (Barber & Tietje, 2008; Arndt et al., 2012) and build value from their collaboration. Ultimately, it is the seller who is responsible for creating value for their customers (Storbacka, Polska, & Sääksjärvi, 2011; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015) for developing their relationship during the solution selling process.

2.3. Interpersonal sales communication

Previous sales research agrees that communication produces value in the relationship between a customer and a seller (Koponen et al., 2019; Ancillai et al., 2019). Researchers in industrial sales highlight the crucial role of information communicated by a seller as a key contributor to whether a customer has a positive experience (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016). Earlier research has shown that digitalization offers several ways that new technologies can affect interpersonal sales communication (Andzulis et al., 2012; Chuang, 2020; Cuevas, 2018). For instance, Agnihotri (2016) has shown several positive influences of digital communications such as information communication behaviours, enhancing salesperson responsiveness, and a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, as the internet and online communication offer more effective methods of acquiring information and communicating, the number of in-person interactions between sellers and customers has declined dramatically during sales processes (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). For example, digital sales interactions, such as video calls and online chat usage, suddenly become far more popular than traditional in-person interactions (see McKinsey & Company, 2021).

Some B2B sales findings show that customers have low expectations of the interpersonal communication held during in-person meetings. Even 82% of buyers mentioned that the content they found on social media was sufficient to make buying decisions (Minsky & Quesenberry, 2016). In the current studies, Ancillai et al. (2019) state that as much as three-quarters of all customers have low interpersonal interaction with salespeople without the need for in-person communication. Although the importance of digital communication is well established in the existing sales studies (Ancillai et al. 2019) and despite the increase of digital communication in sales, the necessity for in-person communication still exists in B2B sales relationships (State of Sales, 2020). Especially in B2B solution selling, when the development of long-term customer relationships is expected, there is a need for an in-person meeting between B2B buyers and sellers with high expectations for the interaction. Traditionally, the customer relationship development process is based on the underlying assumption that communication occurs in person (Dwyer et al., 1987). Again, this leads to an interesting discussion related to building value-based solutions in which salespeople develop relationships with customers through interpersonal in-person communication. For instance, a failure to sell solutions has been shown to almost always be linked to salespeople engaging in the wrong sales activities (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). Moreover, effective interpersonal communication is still associated with developing trust, commitment, shared values, better understanding, and the perceived quality of the relationship (Hung & Lin, 2013). It is therefore necessary for sellers to reflect on their own and others' communication behavior (Koponen et al., 2019) when attempting to create value in customer relationships whether the seller employs both digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process.

Because the pandemic has accelerated organizations' reliance on virtual selling, our study is critical to better understand how value is created in sales relationships when salespersons attempt to employ both digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design and data gathering

Social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) interprets our reality as a social process that is characterized by the relationship between society, the individual, and language. We use social constructionism in this study to identify and interpret various sales situations in the working lives of solution sellers. Specifically, we adopted a phenomenological perspective (Thompson et al., 1989) to understand the richness of value creation development in sellers' digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process. This approach supports the investigation of the relationship between theoretical constructs and an empirically complex and subjective phenomenon (Thompson et al., 1989), and value creation from interpersonal sales communications during the solution selling process. We then applied a triangulation method incorporating several data sources (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). In the current research, the researchers were invited to examine the shift from in-person, communication to digital sales interaction (e.g., Fraccastoro et al., 2020).

3.1.1 Study 1

The interview data-gathering effort focused on 33 interviews with 13 salespeople and three customers with extensive experience in B2B solution selling (ranging from three to 40 years). The sellers had backgrounds in four industries: software solutions, pharmaceuticals, paper, and construction. The participating sellers from the software solutions firm was a large multinational enterprise (MNE) while the others were sellers who represented small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

All of the firms of the participating sellers were invited to the interviews because they were participating in research and teaching collaboration with one of Finland's largest universities. However, these sellers had no current relationship with the business school during this investigation.

The interviews focused on the sellers' opinions on value creation in sales relationships through the use of digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process. We asked them to describe the relationships development process with customers during the sales process. We encouraged the sellers to describe their subjective perspectives (Thompson et al., 1989) of emerging value creation from the use of both digital and in-person communications. In doing so, we sought to understand their experiences as profoundly as the interviewees perceived them, as well as how the subjects organized their experiences (see Polkinghorne, 1988).

We created a database to maintain the information and the qualitative study protocol, as well as to ensure data validity (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). The interviews were conducted between the years 2013–2018, were semi-structured and open-ended. To verify the sellers' descriptions of their communication in the sales processes, we also spoke with three customers (marked with an asterisk in Table 2 below). During the interviews, we started by asking background questions about the seller's experience in B2B solution selling and then sought more information through open-ended questions by following the chronological development of the value creation between partners throughout the sales process. When the sellers needed clarification of an open-ended question, we explained more about the phenomenon and answered the interviewees' questions for as long as was needed for the respondent to understand the intent of the question. Each salesperson was interviewed between two and four times. (Examples of the questions are found in APPENDIX 1). In Table 2, we present the descriptions of the interviewees along with their respective industries.

Table 2. Descriptions of the interviewees with the industry they work in.

INFORMANT	AGE	INDUSTRY	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Seller A	38	Cement solutions	2
Seller B	41	Building trade, cement solutions, office and business premises	4
Seller C	52	Building trade, office and business premises	2
Seller D	55	Office and business premises	1
Seller E	55	Paper industry and corrugated cardboard solutions	2
Seller F	52	Paper industry and corrugated cardboard solutions	4*
Seller G	58	Paper industry and corrugated cardboard solutions	3*
Seller H	52	Pharmacy solutions	2
Seller I	48	Pharmacy solutions	2*
Seller J	44	Pharmacy solutions	1
Seller K	50	Software solutions	4
Seller L	43	Software solutions	3
Seller M	47	Software solutions	3

* A customer who confirms the seller's perspectives

3.1.2 Study 2

To understand the meanings of in-person communication better, the second wave of data was collected during a sales training event. A total of 32 solution sellers from a construction company participated in a two-day workshop that focused on the sales process and interactions with customers. The sellers were between 28 and 62 years old, and their work experience ranged from a number of weeks to several decades. None of them participated in the previous interviews.

The sales training was based on the method of Sales Theatre (Koponen & Julkunen, 2015) involving solution-selling situations from actual business occurrences. During the training event, the sellers were divided into groups of four to eight members. Each seller participated in a minimum of two groups. In the 15 video recordings (totalling 225 minutes), one participant at a time took the role of the seller, another as customer, and the rest of the group observed and provided feedback. Because the in-person meetings were based on solution selling negotiations of the participant's actual business, the sellers assumed their own roles with customers in detail. The seller focused on their own skills as a solution builders managing the sales process. Additionally, based on each seller's experience with customers, they could simulate the customer's role. The sellers were also free to describe the relationships developed through in-person communication during their B2B sales processes.

We asked all participants of the sales negotiations to reflect on each seller's communication style (both verbal and non-verbal), their general skills in communication using speech, their awareness and understanding of nonverbal communication, and their managerial skills in controlling different sales situations. We also asked them to reflect on the seller's arguments, closing skills, and service orientation. They described each seller's strategic skills, which included questions about their understanding of the customer's products and strategies, their own firm's strategy related to products and the market, and their competitors, including competitive products, services, and sales procedures. The sellers themselves and their colleagues who gave feedback produced a rich picture of varied meetings described as in-person communication. In Table 3, we describe the B2B sales negotiations used in the sales training event.

Table 3. B2B sales negotiations in the solution sales training event

SALES NEGOTIATION	NEGOTIATION DESCRIPTION	SALES PARTICIPANTS	FEEDBACK	NUMBER OF SALES NEGOTIATIONS
Railway construction	Negotiation on a seller's offering on wood materials for railway construction.	1 B2B solution seller 1 B2B customer	6 B2B solution sellers/ participants gave feedback to a seller.	3
Building bar	Negotiation on building bar solution for customer's (retailer) end-customer need.	1 B2B solution seller 1 B2B customer	3 B2B solution sellers/ participants gave feedback to a seller.	2
Ready-mix concrete solution case B.	Negotiation on a cement product solution for a customer's construction business.	1 B2B solution seller 1 B2B customer	3 B2B solution sellers/ participants gave feedback to a seller.	3
Lightweight solution	Negotiation on a small pies solution for a customer's construction business.	1 B2B solution seller 1 B2B customer	3 B2B solution sellers/ participants gave feedback to a seller.	3
Industrial property	Negotiation on building an industrial hall for renting business.	1 B2B solution seller 1 B2B customer	2 B2B solution sellers/ participants gave feedback to a seller.	2
Firm pitch	Pitching a firm to a new industrial partner (Case presentation)	1 B2B solution seller 1 B2B customer	3 B2B solution sellers/ participants gave feedback to a seller.	2

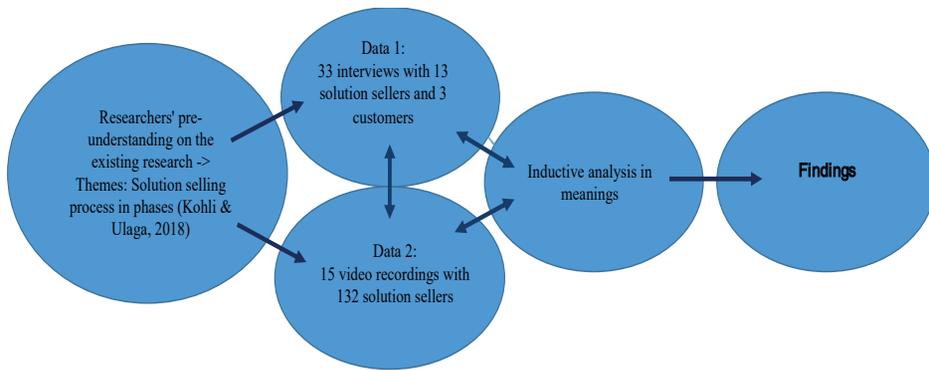
3.2 Analysis

The recorded interviews and videos from the two phases of the study were transcribed and cross-checked by two researchers. During the analysis process, the interpretations of data sources were clarified through ongoing reflections (Haytko, 2004). The researchers first analyzed each interview and examined the sellers' videos from the sales training separately using a qualitative thematic analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015) that was intended to convey an understanding of the creation of value in the customer relationships when the seller employs both digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process.

Because we had a pre-understanding of the phenomena as researchers, the themes were followed in the phases of the solution selling process as originally presented by Ulaga and Kohli (2018). To that end, the meanings were allowed to emerge inductively (Patton, 2002; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Interpreting the whole data independently, two researchers identified meanings related to each theme. Then, they compared the sellers' meanings from their individual thematic analyses and discussed the differences. Any differences were resolved through discussion and further analysis as suggested by Jick (1979) In such an analysis, the final explanation might not emerge from the initial analysis; instead, it may require several iterations, starting with the initial analysis of the findings from all the data sources, and then extending the findings by comparing the analyzed content across the data. We judged that replication occurred when conclusions were reached, and findings were alike (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). When a common understanding was reached, the researchers developed the final findings together.

We found this qualitative analysis method and logic to be appropriate for such an investigation because the solution sellers do not hold real systems, such as types of interpersonal communication, in their minds when they manage their sales processes; rather, they hold images of real systems that are shaped by their subjective meanings (Haytko, 2004). In Figure 1 we present the empirical process of the study.

Figure 1. The empirical process of the study



4. Findings

In this study, we analyze the value creation of communication from the perspectives of the customer and the seller when the seller employs both digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process. The themes of the analysis were identified following the solution selling process of Ulaga & Kohli (2018) including the phases of requirements and definition, customization and integration, deployment, and post-deployment support. The changes in meanings reveal the value of sales communication. In Table 4, we summarize our findings.

Table 4. Summarizing the findings

THE SOLUTION SELLING PROCESS IN PHASES	EMPHASIS OF COMMUNICATION	OUR EXPLANATION OF THE VALUE OF COMMUNICATION FROM THE TASK-SPECIFIC MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE OF EACH PHASE IN THE SOLUTION SELLING PROCESS	OUR EXPLANATION OF THE VALUE OF COMMUNICATION FROM THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE DURING THE SOLUTION SELLING PROCESS
The phase of requirements and definition	Digital communication	Using digital communication channels allows the seller to save money and time as well as gather sufficient information that supports in understanding the customers and their needs, the strategies of the customers' firms, and their positioning in the market.	<p>Digital communication offers the seller an opportunity to interpret whether it is beneficial to move on to the customization and integration phase with this particular customer in the solution selling process.</p> <p>Digital communication provides the seller opportunities to evaluate whether it is valuable to develop a profitable and reciprocal relationship with this particular customer.</p>
The phase of customization and integration	In-person communication	<p>In-person communication creates value through meetings. During in-person meetings, both customers and sellers can share detailed information and detailed professional knowledge, apply diverse negotiation techniques, and show social presence and good listening skills.</p> <p>An in-person meeting offers an opportunity to figure out customer's and seller's needs and expectations, as well as have an in-depth understanding of both partners' strategy and their situations.</p> <p>An in-person meeting helps the seller to simplify and clarify the strategic aims of the partners, build the solution, focus on the benefits of the solution, and close the deal.</p>	<p>In-person communication increases relationship orientation (at the same time digital communication disappears).</p> <p>In-person communication supports effective conflict management and problem-solving.</p> <p>Successful in-person communication is a basis for a long-term customer relationship.</p>
The phases of deployment and post-deployment	The interplay between digital communication and in-person, communication	Digital communication enhances task-specific communication and makes the job of the seller and a customer easier.	<p>The interplay between digital communication and in-person communication creates a unique relationship opportunity between customer and seller.</p> <p>In-person meetings ensure relationship orientation through social disclosure during the solution selling process.</p> <p>The closer the relationship between the seller and the customer, the easier it is to be more flexible in using digital communication and in-person communication.</p>

4.1. Value creation in the phase of requirements and definition during the solution selling process

In the first phase of the sales process, the value creation of sales communication is based on the seller's task management aims. Specifically, the findings show that a seller's evaluation of a customer as a profitable partner is unidirectional within digital channels. Therefore, digital communications can reveal value as an impetus for the solution selling process, showing opportunities that can develop into a relationship with a particular customer. Therefore, digital communication can be seen as a trigger for the seller to begin the development of the customer relationship. If the value creation proposition between the partners is unclear, then the sellers would have no reason to continue the sales process.

In this phase, the sellers seek as much background information on their prospective partners as possible before contacting them, which involves the usage of the internet for sources of information (e.g., webpages and social media channels such as LinkedIn and Twitter) as the following quotation shows. *"Before we are ready to start collaboration, we check customer's websites and available information at least for understanding this particular company, identifying their needs and finding an opportunity for developing collaboration"* [Seller H]. Using these varied digital channels allows the seller to save money and time as well as gather sufficient information that supports them in understanding the customers and their needs, the strategies of the customers' firms, and their positioning in the market.

Indeed, however, the sellers recognized that digital communication presents a limited picture of a customer's purchasing portfolio and the strategy of their firm. *"If this particular company seemed credible based on the internet sources, we contact them"* [Seller A]. Therefore, digital communication supports a seller's pursuit of a customer.

At the requirements and definition phase of the sales process, we identified two types of salespeople who decide whether to pursue a sales opportunity. Both groups make the decision based on firm-level aspects. The first group emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the partner is able to pay for all elements that would be part of the contract: *"A customer's financial standing is crucial to us, and everything is therefore calculated before we start a sales process. So, we know exactly which partner is profitable to ensure a win-win partnership"* [Seller F]. The second group stresses the need to have a strategic understanding of their customers and they are highly relationship-oriented from the very beginning of the process. Moreover, they look forward to beginning the sales process: *"Strategy is the background to a customer understanding."* [Seller L].

If the seller interpreted that it is possible to develop a profitable and reciprocal business with the customer, they begin the customization and integration phase of the solution selling process.

4.2. Value creation in the phase customization and integration during the solution selling process

During this phase, the sellers built a unique solution for each customer. Consequently, sales communication begins shifting more towards in-person communication as the role of digital communication decreases. Indeed, the meaning of digital communication disappears if the seller decides to begin in-person communication that ultimately leads to increasing the relationship orientation, as the following seller describes: *"We do things to help our customers implement their strategy better. Our strategic aims need to meet the customer's strategy as well"* [Seller L].

In-person communication creates value for the sellers and customers from the very first

meeting and continues throughout the solution selling process, even into subsequent meetings. They describe heightened requirements for in-person communication related to an expectation of knowing a customer or a seller, as described in the following seller's statement: *"You need to really know your customer. You [the seller] have to become acquainted with the customer and build reciprocal trust, maybe later make friends"* [Seller H]. Indeed, in-person communication is required for developing and strengthening a relationship as a customer of Seller F confirmed. *"Together we grow a lot... I can trust Seller F because he is an honest person and he is really customer-oriented. I can feel, every time we meet, this positive sensation. He always tries to satisfy our request."* The meanings underlined an opportunity for positive collaboration and openness to develop a relationship. Both partners want a win-win solution.

To justify the value creation of communication, the sellers defined themselves as skillful in-person communicators who employ appropriate sales skills and techniques to establish the relationship orientation. Sellers aspire to develop better sales negotiation techniques before meeting a customer in person: *"Understanding a customer ... and listening ... [and] building a solution through a reciprocal understanding with a customer ... is our job as a solution seller"* [Seller D]. Sellers are highly aware of their communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, which are required for in-person sales meetings. As one seller explained: *"You [as a seller] need to know how to overcome objections and solve your customer's problems ... understanding the true reasons if the customer hesitates"* [Seller K].

From the relational perspective, value in-person communication encompasses many diverse requirements, such as sharing detailed information and professional knowledge, using negotiation techniques, and establishing good listening skills. Additionally, it requires exhibiting a deep understanding of the partner's needs, effective conflict management and problem-solving skills, a responsibility to deliver on promises, and a willingness to adapt the sales to the customer's expectations so as to continue the sales process. Our videos from sales training showed that in-person communication is crucial in negotiations. *"Good listening, face-to-face contact was kept, a customer was allowed to discuss, a seller was calm. However, the seller participated in the discussion actively, he answered the questions and managed the process towards closing."* [Seller 3, who was giving feedback in Building Bar case].

Our findings also show that in-person communication at this phase involves more interpersonal, in-person, and reciprocal sales communication than can be captured with digital communications during the first phase of the solution selling process. In this phase, in-person communication was seen as a prerequisite for success involving a requirement for a seller's understanding of a customer's expectations. Moreover, a seller must state a clear strategic picture to a customer who is focusing on the benefits of a solution. *"In a face-to-face way, you should show your customer the main picture. You [as a seller] need to always speak frankly and clarify what your customer's benefit is if they make a decision to accept the solution you offer"* [Seller D]. In our findings, the value of sales communication created for the customer relationship needed such in-person communication. Particularly, in-person communication is critical to value creation and moves the solution selling process towards a deal. The seller's success during the in-person communication is a basis for a long-term relationship.

4.3. Value creation in the deployment and post-deployment phases of the solution selling process communication

In the deployment and post-deployment phase, value creation of communication is interestingly built on the interplay between digital communication and in-person communication.

Such interplay reflects a dependency between the seller and buyer as well as their strong roles in interpersonal sales communication. This interplay shows that the value creation of communication develops a unique relationship between the two. The resulting value creation involves increasing requirements for the relationship orientation. Sellers emphasized the use of digital communication during the interviews, but they also stressed the need for deep interpersonal in-person communication. Surprisingly, having a great time and being able to spend time together was described as meaningful to both partners and resulted in a lot of informal discussions. Within strong relationships, digital communication was most often identified as task-specific, while in-person communication involved more social disclosure, as Seller F described: *“When you meet a close customer, you don’t speak business at all. You just spend a great time together. Later on, you can send an email confirming the business-related expectations. Your customers trust in your ability to manage the process as a sales leader and solution builder.”*

The findings show that the closer the relationship between the seller and the customer, the more frequently salespeople can communicate by combining digital and in-person sales interactions. As such, the value of the customer relationship is established through digital communication in task-related business issues during this phase of the solution selling process. *“We describe our main substance area, offerings, resources, and supporting services”* [Seller I]. In in-person meetings, relationship orientation between a customer and a seller is crucial. *“We do a lot of business with our key partners just virtual sources, that sort of thing ... it works a lot better [to have a Skype meeting for example] when you are working with a trusted customer”* [Seller A]. Value creation to the customer relationship through in-person communication was most often related to some particular relational aspects such as trust. A high level of trust between customer and seller produces easier and more productive interpersonal sales communication. Sellers describe successful in-person communication with close customers in ways such as: *“Communication is very natural and fluent, which gets rid of unnecessary complications ... Even very difficult issues can be resolved through discussion”* [Seller H].

In this phase, we define the value of communication for the customer relationship as a dialogue that combines digital and in-person sales communication and makes it possible to build and strengthen trust while reaching a mutual understanding. This strengthens the customer relationship orientation and supports ongoing and future solutions by employing task management aim in the deployment and post-deployment phases of the solution selling process. This shows goal congruence. The sellers focused on common strategic and profitable goals with the customer and overcame lengthy negotiations. *“Strong relationships with key customers are the basis of success in the sales process. Cooperation with the customer is very important ... working toward a common goal”* [Seller F].

The deep relational aspect of in-person communication is based on the salesperson’s sales communication competence (Koponen et al., 2019). Therefore, the salesperson’s ability to use the interplay between appropriate digital and in-person communications is critical. In-person meetings even relate to personal information about the salesperson (e.g., talking about hobbies, family relationships, job history, and personal life). *“With a close customer, I can talk about individual relationships, family, interests, and so on ... I want to show that this is me as a person here”* [Seller L].

5. Discussion

The findings show value creation of communication through changes in digital and in-person communication during the solution selling process for both customer and seller. To the best

of our knowledge, previous studies have not investigated the value of digital and in-person communication for customers and sellers in the B2B solution sales process. When the seller employs both digital and in-person communications, we confirm a high dependency between the solution selling process and the seller's task management aims in addition to a relational aspect between customer and seller (Panagopoulos et al., 2017; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018). Our findings show that both sellers and customers use the value of communication when incorporating digital and in-person communications. While digital sales communication is based on a seller's task-specific management, in-person communication is mainly based on a seller's relational orientation towards the customer. The interplay between the communication types reveals the roles of such perspectives, as presented in Table 4.

Though the data was gathered before the pandemic, digitalization had already begun influencing the sales process and functions dramatically (Cuevas, 2018). We found during our interviews that the importance of interpersonal, in-person sales communication was re-emerging and is unquestionably continuing. During the solution selling process, the need for value creation from sales relationships through digital and in-person communication is crucial. As shown in the requirements and definition phase of solution selling (Ulaga & Kohli, 2018), using digital communication and IT-based sources in business has already transformed the ways salespeople operate and the way they conduct the sales process (see Agnihotri et al., 2016). We expand upon the earlier research by showing that value creation through digital communication has a strong role in the requirements and definition phase. In the customization and integration phase, in-person communication occurs and a seller's relational orientation outweighs digital communication. Later in the process, the value of communication to customer relationships is created through dialogue by combining digital communication involving the seller's task management and in-person communication involving a relationship orientation. Our findings show an innovative path to the dialogue between the types of communications.

We confirm Chuang (2020), Cuevas (2018), and Andzulis et al. (2012) research by finding that digitalization offers several ways where new technologies can affect interpersonal sales communication. Additionally, we found that the use of digital communication has a strong effect on the customer-seller relationship, driven by a search for information and the collection of relevant data. Indeed, digital communication helps salespeople understand the customer's portfolio and the opportunities for cooperation among several sales functions (Agnihotri et al., 2012), but also vice versa. Even when collaboration between seller and customer is unclear, digital communication offers an appropriate, polite, effective, and ethical path for finding opportunities. Moreover, it saves time and money. Agnihotri (2016) has shown mostly the relationship-oriented influences of digital communications (such as information communication behaviors, enhancing salesperson responsiveness, a positive relationship on customer satisfaction). We suggest that a salesperson's use of digital communication influences the solution selling process, and the role of these communications will change during the process (See Table 4).

Even though digital communication is increasingly crucial to sales relationships (Ancillai et al., 2019), our findings underline the strong role of in-person communication. We found that in-person meetings are expected, as they include opportunities for strengthening interpersonal relationships in the solution selling process. Therefore, even with the increased use of digital communication (Ancillai et al., 2019; Chuang, 2020; Cuevas, 2018), in-person meetings are required for creating value in sales processes and relationships.

When the relationship between a customer and seller is close and a long-term relationship

is expected, we also find a relationship between digital and in-person sales communication. This finding was especially prominent during the later phases of the solution selling process. Specifically, our findings show that the stronger the interpersonal connection, the stronger the opportunity to incorporate more digital communication into the solution selling process.

Finally, we found that relationships usually become more trusting and stronger as the parties use discussions for social disclosure during their in-person meetings. The importance of value creation at the interpersonal level is tied to outside workplace interactions. For example, having a great time and being able to spend time together was described as a real value in the relationship during the solution selling process. Reciprocal self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973) between a customer and a seller may strengthen the value creation derived from interpersonal sales communication.

5.1. Managerial Implications

Because sales organizations are modernizing their sales strategies and developing digital sales interactions using a new combination of digital communication and virtual face-to-face tools (Bharadwaja & Shipley, 2020), our findings support salespeople need to understand the importance of value creation in sales relationships through the use of digital and in-person communication. We encourage salespeople to commingle their use of digital and in-person communications.

Furthermore, we suggest that companies create sales communication strategies built around value creation with a focus on sales communication competence. Such a sales communication strategy should include elements of sales communication competence (Koponen et al., 2019), which requires knowledge of effective and appropriate interpersonal communication, a motivation to interact with customers by using interpersonal communication skills, and employment of sales acumen. Sales communication competence should manifest itself in behavior that the parties perceive to be appropriate and effective (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Hargie, 2016). The interpersonal sales communication strategy can also encourage sellers to focus on developing strong relationships with their customers and fostering customer relationships at the firm and individual levels. This strategy would evaluate each customer to establish customer focus and adapt sales tactics for the concurrent use of digital communication and in-person communication.

Moreover, sales organizations should leverage the opportunities which virtual engagements allow. Based on the level of relationship, sales meetings can be more frequent and spontaneous, crises can be resolved more quickly, and critical data is more likely to be readily available to the salesperson. As the relationship between parties becomes established, managers can shift resources away from travel for in-person meetings and rely on virtual calls. As a result, sales budgets can be invested more heavily towards customer acquisition.

5.2. Limitations and Further Research

Our findings build upon earlier research to better understand the importance of value creation in sales relationships through digital and in-person communication during the solution selling process. Because we followed a philosophy of social constructionism (Bergen & Luckmann, 1967), our study is not generalizable and does not quantify the impact of value creation in sales communication through increased sales revenue or profit, and we must therefore leave that to future research. Indeed, we encourage empirical research that tests our findings and identifies

the conditions in which profound, profitable value creation can develop.

We urge researchers to study value creation between a seller team and a customer team focusing on sales communication. Other beneficial research could investigate sales communication based on team members' roles or decision-making and trust-building between teams. Moreover, researchers could explore sales communication competence (Koponen et al., 2019) or selling competence (Powers, Jennings, & DeCarlo, 2014) in virtual selling environments.

As a limitation, the B2B solution selling process often moves constantly back and forth across its different phases, and therefore, the interviewees' descriptions can never be complete, in that they only capture specific moments during the process. Also, different industries may have varying requirements for digital sales communication channels and/or procedures for in-person meetings. These practices may affect a seller's digital communication, in-person communication, and the interplay between them.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to the existing sales literature by revealing the value creation of communication when the seller employs both digital and in-person communications during the solution selling process. The findings show that the value of communication is produced through digital and in-person communications as well as the interaction between them. We found that interpersonal sales communication requires that sellers and customers have the ability to use these communication types as part of their sales communication.

While digital sales communication is based on the seller's task-specific management aims during each particular phase of the solution selling process, in-person communication is mainly based on a seller's relational orientation towards a profitable relationship. In the phase of the requirements and definition, value creation of digital communication is mainly based on the aims of information gathering on a particular customer which supports a seller's pursuit of a customer. In the phase of customization and integration, sales communication is expected to shift towards in-person communication — the role of digital communication decreases which leads to increasing relationship orientation. In particular, in-person communication was seen as a prerequisite for success. In the phases of deployment and post-deployment, the value of communication is built on the interplay between digital communication and in-person communication. The findings show that the closer the relationship between the seller and the customer, the more salespeople are required to create value of communication in the relationship in dialogue by combining digital and in-person sales interactions.

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APPENDIX 1.

Examples of the questions in the interviews:

Can you explain your experience as a B2B solution seller?

How would you describe the solution building during the sales process in your work?

How would you describe communication with a customer during the solution building in the sales process of your work?

How would you describe the digital communication during the solution building in the sales process of your work?

How would you describe the face-to-face communication during the solution building in the sales process of your work?

Can you tell us about the phases of your sales process?

Regarding communication with a customer, what are the main milestones in the sales process that bring value to you as a seller and to the partner?

Based on your own sales, how would you describe value creation between you and your customer in the sales process? Please give us some real situations.