Creating value in business relationships: The role of sales

Alexander Haas a,⁎, Ivan Snehota b, Daniela Corsaro b

a Karl-Franzens-University Graz, Department of Marketing, Elisabethstrasse 50b, 8010 Graz, Austria
b University of Lugano (USI), Via Bufi, 13, CH-6904 Lugano, Switzerland

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 15 February 2011
Received in revised form 8 July 2011
Accepted 9 July 2011
Available online 15 December 2011

Keywords:
Business relationships
Relationship value
Sales function
Service-dominant logic
Value creation

A B S T R A C T

Understanding the creation of value in business relationships has been a long-standing goal of researchers and managers alike. By adopting a relational perspective, recent research on business relationships has made much progress in understanding value-creating processes. As the sales function is thought to be a pivotal part of the value-creating processes in business relationships, the evolving view on creating relationship value clearly has implications for our understanding of the role of sales in these processes. In contrast to its importance, the question of how the sales function contributes to creating value in business relationships has been largely neglected in extant literature. The objective of our paper is to answer this question by systematically linking the relational value creating process to the sales function’s content. Interpreting value creation as interaction process, we identify four features of value-creating processes in business relationships suggested in recent research (i.e., jointness, balanced initiative, interacted value, and socio-cognitive construction) and, based on these, outline a framework that is used to define a set of tasks that are key to creating value in business relationships and hence become critical for sales in its hitherto neglected role as co-creator of relationship value. We illustrate the various tasks of this new role of sales with data from 43 interviews with sales managers and salespeople. Along with related normative recommendations in extant literature, the interviews provide support for the validity and relevance of our framework for understanding the role of sales in creating relationship value. This framework puts forward a much-needed first effort towards a theory of sales’ role in creating relationship value and offers several opportunities for future research.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The idea of value and of value creating had at all times a prominent role in business studies, management, and marketing (Drucker, 1973; Woodruff, 1997). The very scope of marketing has been conceived broadly as to “produce and deliver goods and services that people want and value” (Levitt, 1983, p. 5). In business-to-business markets, the dominating issue has been conceiving, producing, and delivering value (Anderson & Narus, 1998).

Over the last couple of decades, the relational perspective appears to have gained an important place in the marketing discipline and theory (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, & Snehota, 2003; Grönroos, 1997; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The relationship perspective stresses the interdependence of the parties to the relationship, the interactive nature of customer-supplier relationships, and the resulting dynamics of such relationships (e.g., Ballantyne, Frow, Varey, & Payne, 2010; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This perspective has evident consequences for how value and value creation is conceptualized. In particular on business markets, creating value in customer–supplier relationships implies other priorities and criticalities than the traditional linear logic of conceiving, producing, and delivering value would suggest. Rather, a conceptualization of value creation in business relationships has to reflect the nature and characteristics of the interaction process in which relationship value is created (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2010; Grönroos, 2010).

It is all too obvious that the sales function in the practice of marketing has an important role to play in relationships with customers and in creating value in these relationships. As business-to-business firms are increasingly moving toward a service-dominant logic of co-creation of value, scholars have acknowledged that the role of sales has to reflect the relational nature of sales processes (Sheh & Sharma, 2008). But in contrast to this insight and in line with the traditional perspective of value creation in business markets, the prevailing view of the sales function in extant literature is that sales contributes to conceiving, producing, and delivering customer value by understanding customers’ and/or sellers’ needs and fulfilling them with the bundle of goods and services fitting to these needs (e.g., Weitz & Bradford, 1999). As is evident (and will be presented in detail subsequently), extant sales literature does not reflect the evolved interaction-based understanding of creating relationship value. Consequently, sales’ role in the creation of value in business relationships remains unclear.
The objective of this paper is to address this important concern by exploring how the role of sales in creating relationship value is likely to be affected by the relational perspective on marketing and its value-related criticalities, and what tasks would become key for sales from such a relational perspective on value creation. Specifically, the paper investigates two main research questions: (1) How do the facets of relational value creation impact the content of the sales function? (2) To what extent does extant research on the sales function reflect marketing’s relational perspective on value creation in business relationships? To answer these questions, this paper (a) develops an interaction-based framework of sales’ key tasks in the creation of relationship value; (b) provides support for the validity of this framework by illustrating its content based on primary and secondary data; and (c) systematically links the hitherto fragmented research on concepts related to sales’ role in creating relationship value to our framework. As is evident, our contribution is mainly conceptual and the use of empirical data is limited to validate our framework.

The paper closes a relevant research gap by providing first conceptual steps toward a comprehensive, interaction-based theory of value creation in business relationships. It contributes to previous research by integrating extant value and sales literature, identifying a set of criticalities relevant to the creation of relationship value, and thus improving our understanding of creating relationship value and sales’ role in it. We show that prior research has not addressed some of sales’ key tasks for creating relationship value and comes short of capturing the content of the others. It possibly suggests that previous dis-appointing findings of research on sales’ performance outcomes may result from not having considered the facets of value creation in business relationships.

From a managerial perspective, our research identifies key areas of concern for the proper management of customer value creation. The findings will help firms and sales managers assess their current strategy and sales approach with respect to the creation of relationship value, allowing for better decisions on currently neglected sales force activities. The results also inform firms about ways to design the sales function for creating customer value. Thus, our study supports firms and sales managers in their efforts to provide and increase customer value, and to strengthen the firms’ competitive positions.

In the next section, we use the concept of interaction as a fruitful conceptual base for linking the critical issues in creating relationship value, as suggested in extant research, and for identifying various facets of the value creation process. After that, we will examine to what extent researchers’ view of the sales function reflects a role of sales as creator of relationship value. Next, we will develop an interaction-based framework of sales’ key tasks in the creation of relationship value and illustrate its content based on primary and secondary data. Finally, we link the research on concepts related to sales’ role in creating relationship value to our framework and discuss implications for research and management and directions for future research.

2. How is value produced in business relationships

There is a long tradition of envisioning the process of value creation for the customer as based on the perceived and expected value of the products and services delivered. The roots of this view go back to the exchange theory of value in economics that supplanted the production theory of value of the classics (Jevons, 1957; Walras, 1954). The essence is that value of products and services becomes manifest in exchange transactions among (competent and knowledgeable) buyers and sellers who perceive the object of exchange as a valued solution to the needs perceived. What is important to this notion of value in exchange is that it considers value as embodied in the products and services that are conceived, designed, produced, and delivered to customers. In a way the notion of value in exchange is linked to this rational sequence of uncovering the needs, devising solutions, producing the solutions, and transferring the solutions to customers in exchange for something else. This conception of the value-creating process has been espoused also in the marketing discipline and inspired the very conception of marketing as exchange (Bagozzi, 1975) and the so popular marketing mix concept (Verdoorn, 1956; McCarthy, 1960; Kotler, 1967).

The turn to a relational perspective in marketing which started in the business-to-business marketing (Ford et al., 2003; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995) and service marketing (Berry & Parasuraman, 1993; Grönroos, 1997; Gummesson, 1985) resulted in the claim that a relational perspective is the more fruitful in order to capture the essence of the marketing process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). The relational perspective became embraced by the marketing discipline in general and there are no doubts that it currently dominates especially the business-to-business marketing. Few would question the empirical relevance of relationships between buyers and sellers in business markets and the implications of the phenomenon of relationships for the theory of marketing.

The value-creating process has been always considered the key to firms’ long-term survival and success of businesses and the source of competitive advantage of firms (Woodruff, 1997; Anderson & Narus, 1998) and remains at the center of the business marketing practice and theory (Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005). Adopting the relational perspective has set in motion considerable efforts to re-think the value-creating processes acknowledging that, rather than being embodied in products or services transacted between buyers and sellers, value originates in relationships (Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Palmatier, 2008; Payne & Holt, 1999; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). The idea that inspired the bulk of the recent research on value of business relationships is that value of relationships can be explained from their content—from the interactions in the relationship (Edvardsson et al., 2010; Grönroos, 2010). But interaction should not be interpreted as simply a means for value creation but rather the very process of value in itself, which is produced “in between” parties (Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2009; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2010). Hence, a systematic conceptualization of value creation in business relationships has to reflect the nature and characteristics of the interaction process in which relationship value is created. Consequently, the concept of interaction provides a fruitful conceptual basis for systematically identifying the various facets of value creation in business relationships, which all originate in the interaction process.

Based on the concept of interaction and in line with recent business marketing literature on relationship value, we propose four intertwined facets that characterize value-creating processes in business relationships: (1) jointness, value in business relationships does not originate from the object of exchange, but is produced because two resource sets (the one of the supplier and the one of the customer) are linked, joined and interfaced (Ballantyne et al., 2010; Vargo & Lusch, 2008b); (2) balanced initiative, both parts to the relationships have the resources and the competence to take the lead in, and may initiate, producing the value (as opposed to only the seller) (Hogan, 2001; Pinnington & Scalon, 2009; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007); (3) interacted value, interactions continuously produce emergent, novel solutions of value which have not been anticipated, but can be temporarily stabilized, by the interacting parties (Cantú, Corsaro, & Snehota, 2011; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2008); and (4) socio-cognitive construction, value cannot be objectively established, but is phenomenological in the sense of subjective in as far as it depends on social and cognitive processes in producing the value (e.g. Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008). We discuss each of these intertwined facets of value-creating processes in turn.
2.1. Jointness

The feature that characterizes the value producing in business relationships that we labeled the jointness of value, is well described in the service-dominant logic (SDL) stream of research and research on service marketing. The argument is that value originates in the coupling and linking of resources, activities, and actors of the supplier and customer organizations that are parties in the relationship. Value of relationships comes to expression as “value-in-use” for the beneficial entity which is mostly the customer (Grönroos, 2008). It has in origin in sharing and integrating of resources, especially the immaterial ones like skills and knowledge, between the supplier and the customer organizations to a solution of value for either of the parties to the relationship (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a,b). Value creation also reflects how the two businesses are connected to the wider network of resources, activities, and actors in their context. This is, not only the customer, but organization’s partners throughout the value network as well, collaborate with other entities and integrate resources so as to provide a solution from a combination of specialized competences and complex services (Cova & Salle, 2008). In line with this notion, recent research has defined a value network as “a spontaneously sensing and responding spatial and temporal structure of largely loosely coupled value proposing social and economic actors interacting through institutions and technology, to: (1) co-produce service offerings, (2) exchange service offerings, and (3) co-create value” (Lusch, Vargo, & Tanniru, 2010, p. 20).

2.2. Balanced initiative

The main-stream marketing literature implies that the initiative and responsibility for a successful marketing stays with the seller/supplier who actually can and should be controlling the marketing process and influencing it for own advantage. The role of customers is assumed to be, on the whole, that of a passive “price and offering taker”, albeit a competent one that knows what his needs and desired solutions are, and is looking for the most efficient supplier of such solutions. This view is related to the assumption that solutions (as bundles of products and services) are first conceived, then produced, and finally sold and transferred on to the customer. This is certainly not a realistic assumption in business-to-business contexts where the products and services actually provided are a variable in business relationships. In such contexts it has long been recognized that customers tend to be active in initiating the process by which effective solutions are brought about and can play a major role in these (Levitt, 1960; Webster, 1984).

On the whole, however, the attention to the customer role has been limited and the tendency to concentrate on the supplier side of the process of value creation has probably been excessive. Recent research has put in evidence that the solution’s effectiveness is not related only to supplier variables, but also to several customer variables (Tuli et al., 2007). As such, a solution often consists of a rather complex set of resources and activities and results from intricate relationship processes such as: the customer requirements definition, the customization and integration of goods and/or services, and their deployment and post-deployment customer support. Consequently, some involvement of the customer appears to be a necessary condition for providing solutions of value in business relationships, which also reflects the argument that value is produced in the customer domain (Grönroos, 2008). The necessity to involve the customer poses a limit on the autonomy of the supplier. Acknowledging it results in ruling out that the supplier can unilaterally design the offering and devise all the solutions necessary for delivering the solution to the customer.

2.3. Interacted value

Great importance has always been given in the marketing literature to both personal and impersonal communication. It is acknowledged also that considerable portion of communication between the buyer and the seller in business relationships is two-way. Less regard has been given to the genuine uncertainty under which most of the decisions are being taken on both sides of the customer-supplier relationship and thus to the wide margins for errors. Minor consideration for the uncertainty could possibly depend on that admitting genuine uncertainty means admitting somehow that managerial action is fallible. However, in business interactions the planned action is hardly feasible. It depends on both the complexity of most solutions (or of the process to find solutions) and on the conditional interaction that makes the future steps to depend on reactions of the counterpart. Focusing on relational processes in business relationships with the mutual conditioning going on and the processes’ time dependence, it becomes impossible to assume that actors on either side of the relationship are “competent, knowledgeable, and fully informed”.

It has been observed that, when it is impossible to avoid uncertainty, the interaction between actors assumes critical importance. Interaction processes may provide missing information and help uncover parties’ tacit knowledge relevant to value creation as time goes by. Interaction has been claimed to be an important economic process through which all of the aspects of business, including physical, financial, and human resources, take their form, are changed and transformed. It also leads to temporarily stabilizing the context. Interaction is not just one of the activities of a business; it is the major mean through which companies systematically relate and combine their activities and resources with each other (Håkansson et al., 2009). Indeed a consistent body of research shows that solutions in customer-supplier relationships in business markets are enacted rather than result from planned behavior and are conceived and re-invented more or less continuously (Cantù et al., 2011).

In addition, scholars that further developed the SDL framework tend to highlight that with multi-sided or reciprocal propositions (Ballantyne et al., 2010) there are no more any message makers and message transmitters. Instead, we see participants to interactive communication processes in which (latent) customer requirements and (unanticipated) solutions emerge through a mutually creative constructed dialog. The perspectives of at least two parties in a business relationship are linked in reciprocal promises while each party is looking for an equitable exchange (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006). SDL and the other connected streams of research have more or less explicitly defined value creation as interactional (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). However, interaction should not be interpreted as simply a means for value creation but rather the very process of value in itself, which is produced “in between” parties (Håkansson et al., 2009; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2010). Because value is interacted it always will be emergent and only temporarily stabilized.

2.4. Socio-cognitive construction

Following a tradition in several branches of the social science that an object’s meaning resides not in the object itself but in the behavior directed toward it (Reynolds, 2003), it becomes apparent in the context of business relationships that value is a product of individual perceptions rather than a function of the qualities or attributes of a certain offering (Lamont, 1955) or of a certain relationship (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010). In the marketing context, SDL research has been arguing with force that “value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary” (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a, p.7). An important point, however, is that value images are enacted by parties while they interact; even looking at the same object (e.g., product, relationship, etc.) each party will develop its own idea about which are the key dimensions of the perceived value. This mechanism of
enactment makes value relationships specific and therefore impossible to determine from the features of the relationship or of the actors.

Coping with ambiguity actors search for meaning, settle for plausibility, and move on (Weick, 2010); action shapes thinking towards interpretations that justify the act (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2003). In this logic narratives become particularly important as sense-making tools through which actors construct their reality and express their idea of value (Weick, 1995). Recently Storbacka and Nenonen (2010, p. 2) translated the logic of sense-making to marketing context and concluded that “markets are socially constructed human artifacts created by the actors who populate and link resources in a specific context. Markets are ideas and activities that exist because actors in the context seek to get access to new resources that they can integrate with their other socio-cultural resources in order to create value”. The implication of the socio-cognitive nature of value is that objective determination of value is ruled out.

3. Sales and value creation in business relationships

The sales function, however difficult to define and locate in a business organization, is a boundary spanning function with a more or less explicit role in producing value in business relationships with customers. In extant literature, it is credited as the function largely responsible for building and maintaining relationships to customers and creating value, and thus thought to play a pivotal role in value-creating processes. Given sales’ widely acknowledged importance for the creation of customer value, one might expect the value-creating role of the sales function to be clearly conceptualized and comprehensively explicated. One would also expect that an evolving understanding of value creation in business relationships should affect our understanding of the value-creating role of sales in these relationships.

To what extent does extant research on the sales function reflect the evolved interaction-based understanding on value creation in business relationships? In sharp contrast to the importance the literature often attributes to the value-creating role of sales, extant literature has largely neglected the content of the role of sales in producing value in business relationships. The prevailing view of the sales function in marketing and management literature relates to a linear process that goes from understanding customers’ and/or sellers’ needs to fulfilling them with the bundle of goods and services fitting to these needs (e.g., Jones, Brown, Zolniers, & Weitz, 2005; Weitz & Bradford, 1999), rather than to the creation of customer value in business relationships. Specifically, as sellers have a portfolio of relationships with their customers (Lambe & Spekman, 1997), extant literature suggests that sales may play different roles in implementing the firm’s marketing strategy and tends to continue to classify these roles in four categories: (1) the production role, (2) the sales role, (3) the marketing role, and (4) the partnering role (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

The four roles of sales are only implicitly linked to the four facets of value creation in business relationships that we discussed previously. In the production role, sales is a product provider and focuses on satisfying, rather than stimulating, demand for the firm’s offering. Sales is mainly concerned with making sales and achieving short-term results for the firm. Based on customers’ interest in products and services, the sales function then primarily involves activities such as informing customers about the availability of products and services, taking orders, and delivering the products and services bought by the customer. In the production role, sales’ contribution to the creation of value is to match the objects of exchange (i.e., the products and services bought by the customer) with the needs of the customers and, subsequently, to make them available. Value is assumed to be mainly a function of the qualities and attributes of these objects (as opposed to actors’ perceptions). While the initiative stays with the customer, it is limited to articulating product needs to suppliers. Customers are assumed to be knowledgeable and fully informed about the products that suit their needs best.

In the sales role, the sales function mainly stimulates demand by persuading customers to buy products and services of the firm. Sales’ primary orientation is to make sales and thus contribute to the firm’s short-term results by using selling techniques, such as hard selling (Chu, Gerstner, & Hess, 1995), to convince customers to buy products. In the sales role, sales’ contribution to the creation of value rests on the exchange view of marketing (Evans, 1963; Sheth, 1976). In contrast to the production role, however, it is sales, rather than the customer, which plays the active part. This active part is restricted in that sales is primarily concerned about identifying customers who can be influenced to buy products they have not thought of before. Related to the idea of effective persuasion, literature on the sales role implicitly acknowledges that an offering’s value is, at least partly, a function of customer perceptions, with customers’ benefit images being enacted during the customers’ interactions with salespeople.

The marketing role emphasizes sales’ function as a problem solver. In this role, the sales function is related to both the needs of the customer and the firm, and to matching available product and service offerings to the customer’s needs. Making the sale remains the main objective of the sales function and an offering’s value is still assumed to originate mainly in products and services produced and transacted between buyers and sellers. The problem-solving role of sales rests on the assumptions that sales is knowledgeable about appropriate solutions to customers’ problems (e.g., Liu & Leach, 2001). While scholars have acknowledged the importance of two-way communication for the problem-solving role of sales (e.g., Ramsey & Sohi, 1997), they suggested that communication patterns follow the message maker and transmitter logic of communication rather than being really interactive, neglecting that customer requirements may emerge through a mutually constructed creative dialog. The sales function in the marketing role is concerned with customers’ needs that are more or less objectively given and benefit perceptions during interactions.

In the partnering role, sales is assumed to create value. Specifically, Weitz and Bradford (1999, p. 243) stress the economic value of partnering by proposing that salespeople “work with their customers and their companies to develop solutions that enhance the profits of both firms.” Although linked to the idea of value creation, this research reflects an incremental evolution of the marketing role in that sales’ main objective shifts to satisfying long-term (as opposed to short-term) customer and seller needs to build and maintain customer relationships (as opposed to maximize sales). Further, the range of alternatives considered by a partnering-oriented sales function in satisfying customer needs is typically not limited to the selling firm’s present product and service offerings, but may involve the customization of products and services and the development of solutions. The partnering role attributes the coordination of customization and solution development efforts to the salespeople (versus jointly to the interacting partners) and still takes a product-centric view on customer–seller collaboration in that it views solutions as bundle of products (rather than relational processes).

An aspect evident in all four roles is that extant literature tends to view the planned sales process at the core of the sales function. It is a process that aims to uncover the needs of the customers and to produce and deliver solutions to maximize long-term satisfaction of customer and seller. Managing interactions with customers is assumed to facilitate exchange. Overall, the popular categorization of the role of sales above is not explicit about how sales in each of the roles concur to produce value in business relationships and there is no further effort to identify the conceptual facets of a value-creating role of sales. The categorization accounts for possibly a different degree of customer orientation but comes short of acknowledging the jointness, balanced initiative,
interacted value and the socio-cognitive origins of value as characteristics of value creation in business relationships.

Since sales arguably plays an important role in value-creating processes in business relationships, the four characteristics of value creation in relationships should affect the sales function and sales activities unless value creation is left entirely to other company functions. As this issue has not been addressed systematically, we think that to examine the implications of our interaction-based perspective on relationship value creation for sales could prove helpful for at least two reasons: It might help us to understand better how sales can contribute to value creation in relationships, which in turn may enhance our understanding of how value is created in business relationships. We will therefore in the following develop an interaction-based framework of sales’ key tasks in the creation of relationship value and discuss how the sales function can reflect the four features identified as originating in the interaction process and suggested as typical of value-creating processes in business relationships by previous research.

4. Research approach

A review of the sales literature reveals relatively little attention to the role of sales in the value-creating process. Against this background and in line with discovery-oriented research on neglected topics (cf. Challagalla, Venkatesh, & Kohli, 2009), for the present research we employ a combination of two approaches. First, we draw on the limited research related to the value-creating role of sales and, based on the features of the value-creating processes in business relationships, we derive implications for the role of sales in these processes. This approach results in a framework which consists of a set of tasks functional for value creation in business relationships and thus critical for sales in its hitherto neglected role as co-creator of relationship value. Second, we use empirical material, mostly data from interviews with sales managers and salespeople in various companies, to illustrate the potential implication of value-creating processes for the role of sales in business relationships. As such, this material provides support for the validity of our framework of sales’ role in creating relationship value.

Our empirical material consists of primary and secondary data. The primary data are part of a wider research project on value creation in customer–supplier relationships, of which we used only the data collected on the sales side. We carried out 43 face-to-face interviews with sales managers and salespeople in various companies, to illustrate the potential implication of value-creating processes for the role of sales in business relationships. As such, this material provides support for the validity of our framework of sales’ role in creating relationship value.

The resulting texts were analyzed by two researchers, who used the four critical features of value-creating processes in business relationships (jointness, balanced initiative, interacted value and socio-cognitive construction of value) as analytical framework and therefore classified the respondents’ replies with respect to these four themes.

We complemented the primary data with secondary data published in extant literature on business relationships (i.e. Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Lynch & O’Toole, 2010) and found that these studies provide rich data that could be of use to answer our research questions. As for the first study, Corsaro and Snehota (2010) interviewed suppliers of security solutions and explored their value perceptions and value strategies; Lynch and O’Toole (2010), instead, studied the evolution of a close collaborative relationship between a software development company and a window and door joinery manufacturer and investigated value creation in terms of new product development. Both studies considered industries compatible with our research context. To qualify for inclusion in our study, we have chosen only the data that relate to the sales function and its contribution to value creation in business relationships, excluding for instance interviews with marketing managers. Further, we considered only qualitative data (i.e., quotes from interviewees who had participated in the published research projects) that had been transcribed verbatim and published as such to avoid interpretation bias. As we did for our primary data, the researchers scrutinized this secondary material using the four features of value-creating processes as analytical framework. We used the primary and secondary data to supplement the insights offered in extant literature on the sales function and value-creating processes in business relationships, on which our implications for sales’ potential role in these processes were based.

5. The role of sales in creating value in business relationships

Considering sales as a function that, potentially, is rather central in creating value in customer relationships, we now turn to the question of how the proposed interaction-based conceptualization of relational value creation would impact the content of the sales function. Based on the four facets of relational value creation derived from the characteristics of the interaction process, we subsequently develop an interaction-based framework of sales’ key tasks in the creation of relationship value. We provide support for the validity of this conceptual framework by illustrating its content based on primary and secondary data. The data reflect insights from sales managers and salespeople on how the facets of value-creating processes in business relationships appear to impact the sales function’s content. As shown in Fig. 1, related to the four facets of value-creating processes, our framework contains 14 intertwined key tasks sales can become involved in its efforts to create relationship value. While facets and key tasks originate in the interaction process and thus combined contribute jointly to sales’ creation of relationship value, we discuss each of them in turn.

5.1. Jointness

Jointness in value creation affects sales in the basic assumption of sequential tasks, its emphasis on designing the product and service offering, and its dominant position in business relationships as provider (as opposed to co-creator) of solutions and value to the customer. It implies that what matters is what and how resources of both parties are combined which entails that they are interfaced. Jointness translates into three distinct sales tasks, namely (1) to identify key relational processes, (2) to identify the most important resource interfaces, and (3) to connect the actors, activities, and resources of both organizations that are direct and indirect parties to the relationship. Identification of key relational processes relates to the need to identify the key connections between the two organizations in terms of...
actors, resources, and processes, with relevance for creating value in the relationship with the customer. A proper identification of such key connections embodies sales' understanding of the supplier organization's competencies and capabilities and linking it to the understanding of a potential solution's value-in-use for the customer. In practice it translates into understanding the customer's own business operations and having an actionable map of both organizations. It involves also prioritizing by identifying the connections with the greatest potential contribution to the creation of customer value. The following quote illustrates how salespeople described this need to identify key connections within the relationship in our interviews:

"[I]n one year I consecutively met [the customer] two times at the national trade fair on security. In both situations, our entire staff was there, including the general director; we had chances to show [the customer] that we were able to deal with his questions and to interact as a team and not only as individuals. This made the difference for [the customer], compared to other suppliers that were there."

Combining and interfacing resources involves linking the actors through which resources can be mobilized and the integration of the resources and processes. Since both, customer and supplier organizations control some resources necessary for creating a new solution and the reciprocal benefits, sales is the linking-pin between two resource sets, namely the activity and actor sets within the supplier and customer organisations. In line with this reasoning, the interviewed salespeople described how effective role performance reflected the importance of relating resources, processes, and actors for creating value. For example, one salesperson described how seller and customer linked their resources to create mutual value:

"[I]n 2008 one of our most important customer had a great problem with the data storage and since his business model was very complicated, we had to develop an ad-hoc solution for it. The customer made all the information available to us, included their weaknesses—which is not so common dealing with security, and it also allowed us to get directly in touch with the other providers of his technologies".

From a network perspective, it becomes crucial for sales to get information on the customer's network and to evaluate the possibilities of networking with other actors in the network:

"[I]n elaborating the selling strategies, I am also interested in collecting information about how the customer is managing its supplier portfolio and to know if he is satisfied with the other suppliers. Obviously this information is often obtained informally from other individuals who are in contact with the customer, directly or indirectly".

The value created by connecting to the network of business relationships sometimes may even come as a surprise. As one salesperson put it:

"[T]he interoperability of our solution with Cisco NAC (Network Access Protection) allowed us to establish a partnership not only with Cisco, but also with other 100 partners worldwide committed to integrate NAP. This was completely unexpected".

In contrast to the diffused assumption that sales can control and direct business relationships suggested by extant research, the
relational perspective on value creation implies that sales only repre-
sent a part of the value creation process which leads customer prob-
lems to be solved.

The picture regarding how jointness potentially affects the role of
sales is thus multifaceted. Apart from the three tasks we identified
above, there is another consideration regarding the impact of rela-
tional value creation on the role and tasks of sales. It concerns the
limits of control that sales should strive for. If we reckon that value
arises from connecting two organized sets, then the role of sales can
hardly be that of getting full knowledge and control. The emphasis
is rather on mediating between the two organizations in order to
find and put in place the workable solutions.

5.2. Balanced initiative

By acknowledging that a customer is not a passive part of the pro-
cess of value creation, the sales function changes its role: not any-
more a persuader, as often seen in the literature, but rather a
speaking partner, capable of soliciting and interpreting the voice, or
rather the voices, of the customer and bringing it to the own compa-
y. Balanced initiative is related to four tasks of sales, (1) identify and
activate (potentially) relevant actors, (2) foster two-way communica-
tion, (3) enable and facilitate mutual learning, and (4) establish co-
leadership in value-creating processes.

When customer involvement becomes a necessary condition for
value creation, the task of identifying and activating relevant actors
reflects the fact that in general various actors participate in, or are rel-
vant for, putting in place solutions of value in business relationships.
Sales potentially has an important role in that. In particular, sales’ task
would involve making relevant people from the buying organization
as well as from the seller or the wider network engage in and possibly
contribute to the creation of customer value. As an example, the follow-
ing statement highlights the importance for value creation inter-
viewed salespeople attributed to the task of activating actors:

“Generally, it is the customer that decides who of its people is part of
the project team. But we also try to identify potentially relevant peo-
ple. In any project, we ask ourselves, ‘Who must be part of the team?
Who must be heard or talked to? Who is important for the project?’
There are people relevant for the content of the solution, others for
the process. If you don’t know the customer’s people who are impor-
tant for your project, you’ll fail!”

Fostering two-way communication reflects the fact that, as part of
value-creating processes, confrontation among actors on the supplier
and the customer side becomes important. This confrontation is not
simply functional for aligning parties’ ideas, but rather for generating
novel ideas and for understanding the reasons of the actors’ behaviors,
which otherwise could remain a black box as hinted in the story below:

“[O]nce a year we organize in Finland a big meeting and invite all our
customers; in that occasion they are free to discuss among them about
our weaknesses and the problems they had with us; at the same time,
we feel free to tell them what went wrong with them last year. The at-
mosphere during the meeting is quite heavy, but at the end the debate
generates transparency in the relationships and, at least for a few
weeks after the meeting it is easier to deal with the customers!”

Fostering a two-way flow of communication includes supporting
the development of personal bonds between actors as the latter usu-
ally are functional for creating an open dialog, without “political” con-
straints. For example, in a study (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010, p. 990), a cus-
tomer suggested:

“The personal connections with [the supplier] make the discus-
sions with the supplier spontaneous; we can formulate our
requests more directly and heart-to-heart, and we feel unbound
to call attention to problems and criticalities of our relationship.”

The task of enabling mutual learning relates to the observation
that salespeople do not necessarily possess all the knowledge on
how to solve the customer’s problems also because it is not static.
As solution effectiveness depends on customer variables, getting
the customer involved in solution development becomes a neces-
sary condition. While the sales function provides some critical re-
sources (e.g., interpersonal skills and knowledge of the
organization), salespeople also would have to learn from the cus-
tomer, increase other actors’ receptiveness to emerging insights,
and try to reduce supplier’s and buyer’s asymmetries of “ignorance”.
In this sense, every salesman acts at the same time as a teacher and
a learner. In the interviews, a salesperson described the value of
mutual learning:

“[I] attended a course on a new vpn (virtual private network) sol-
ution together with the IT manager of one of our customer and I
found it a great experience: we had chance to exchange opin-
ions, compare our views and think together about how we
could use it to solve the customer’s problems”.

Co-leadership in relationships means ensuring that both, the supplier
and the customer, may take their turn in directing and advancing the joint
development of solutions. At best sales can co-ordinate the joint efforts—
but must also be ready to be coordinated by the customer. From this per-
spective, parties may agree on sales’ responsibility to make decisions
and drive the process of value creation, but may also regard sales as a coaching
partner or even only responsible for executing customer’s suggestions,
which puts sales close to acting as a “servant leader” (Greenleaf, 1970)
in the customer relationship. Interviewees acknowledged the importance
of balanced efforts in driving value co-creation. For example, one salesper-
son declared:

“[The customer] knows better than everyone how his processes work.
Sometimes, however, my role is also to teach him about how to ana-
lize these processes and identify their critical aspects; we take the
customer by the hand and gradually enter his ‘world’ together.”

5.3. Interacted value

The concept of interacted value challenges the primacy of plan-
ning usually assumed in the sales literature. It implies that the
value of business relationships is emergent, mutually enacted,
and in perpetual change as parties interact (Corsaro & Snehota,
2010). Interacted value translates into four main tasks of sales:
(1) facilitate interactions, (2) manage emergent situations, (3)
recognize value-related patterns, and (4) freeze the value-
providing solutions.

The task of facilitating interactions is about producing favorable
conditions for value creation by creating interaction opportunities
and making actors interact. Conditions often relate to the work rela-
tionship between relationship partners and how sales may change
the relationship’s characteristics to increase supplier-buyer interac-
tion (e.g., by increasing the services component of the offering). In
the words of a salesperson:

“[A]t the beginning our strategy was mainly based on the attempt
to provide the customer with products, above all hardware com-
ponents, containing high tech technologies. Over time, however,
we decided to increase the service component of our offering;
we understood that through services we could work in a more
strict contact with the customer and therefore increase the likeli-
hood of understanding his problems”.

Similarly, in Lynch and O’Toole’s (2010, p. 7) study, an example for value creation in supplier–buyer interactions is given:

“In one way we didn’t know who they were and what they were capable of. Meeting up with them every Friday allowed us to figure out what they were about? How they work? Are they trustworthy? Are they honest? I suppose they were doing the same thing to us. We started to learn and adapt to each other’s ways of doing things …… we began to appreciate each other’s ideas and suggestions. I think when you meet on a regular basis and you are actually talking to each other, answers to some issue inevitably come up or at least there might be an idea of the way that we should progress.”

Favorable conditions for value creation may also include interpersonal, social interactions between actors that foster trust and commitment:

“If every year we invite our more important customers and their wives to spend five days of holiday in an amazing place. Last year we went to Israel. This initiative makes the business atmosphere friendlier and promotes interpersonal interactions. By having many possibilities of interaction with our customers, it is more likely to understand each other, even when our views diverge”.

To facilitate and enhance supplier–buyer interaction sales may also strive for modalities that allow for “richer” interactions:

“If a couple of years ago I pushed to adopt the ‘tele-presence’ technology by Cisco, which simulates real meetings and gives the idea that our counterparts are just on the opposite side of the table.”

Assuming that value emerges in interaction implies a need to manage emergent situations. This is because interaction between parties always has unexpected consequences and it is impossible to anticipate what will happen in a business relationship. Consequently, there is the need to continuously monitor the evolution of the relationship and be always ready to create appropriate “pastures” which provide the ground for mutually creative constructed dialog in the pursuit of relationship value. The emergent situations can be used to build, shape, and re-fine an offering that creates customer value. The evolving, emergent nature of relationships was mentioned by several interviewees. For example, one salesperson described it as follows:

“The relationship with the customer is continuously changing: this is normal: new technologies are introduced, new suppliers enter the market, acquisitions and strategic alliances are very common, and so on. With these premises, I try to continuously monitor the customer and his needs, and to have frequent interactions so as to catch rapidly any sign of dissatisfaction”.

The impact of such emergent situations may even involve the risk of relationship dissolution:

“If it often happens that when the customer company merges or is acquired by another firm, then it changes its supply strategy. It is very hard for us to face these changes because it is like building the relationship from scratch”.

Given the high degree of uncertainty of decisions on customer and supplier side, the management of emergent situations, particularly in case of divergences, embodies establishing and acting upon trust (Lynch & O’Toole, 2010, p. 9):

“There was a personal relationship between myself and my counter-part from the buyer. We trusted one another and I knew that he would vouch for us and pass on his opinion about us to the buyer.

In a way I knew he was going to be our product champion in the company... We believed that the relationship I had developed with him was the key to the buyer.”

Sensing and recognizing value-related patterns in supplier–customer interactions rests on the fact that such interactions produce opportunities in terms of novel solutions of value. The more effective the detecting of enacted solutions, however difficult this might be, the greater the potential value created in the relationship. Interviewees referred to both, the difficulty and the potential value of sensing emergent solutions. A manager illustrated this task’s contribution to value creation as follows:

“If the customer] was one of our best customers. Over time we understood that by merging our consultancy competences with their technological skill we could create a new company absolutely on top of the market and we did it!”

The task of freezing value-providing solutions relates to the continuously evolving nature of interactions and the benefits, not to say necessity, of temporary stabilization of interaction patterns for value creation. In other words, as the value enacted in continuously evolving interactions appears to be fluid, the fluidity needs to be temporarily stabilized to create the possibility of “quasi-exchanges” of value between relationship partners. As flexibility comes at a cost, stabilizing solutions is necessary to ensure that the solutions are economically and financially sound:

“It's absolutely impossible to reach 100% security in a company, not even with millions of investment this could be possible! Threats are continuously evolving as well as malicious hackers. I therefore always need to find an equilibrium with the customer between their budgets and an acceptable level of security.”

5.4 Socio-cognitive construction

The socio-cognitive construction of value challenges the basic assumption of the objectivity of value embodied in objects of exchange. By accepting that value perceptions are socially constructed in interactions between parties, the sales function acquires three new roles, which are critical to creating relationship value: (1) disclose actors’ perceptions of value, (2) enable mutual understanding, and (3) create collective meaning among relationship partners.

Disclosing actors’ perceptions of value emphasizes the importance of understanding each actor’s subjective idea about which are the key dimensions of value to him or her. As value cannot be considered as objectively given or homogeneous across relationships, the development of a solution that aims at embodying and making transferable objectively given value, which is usually associated with the sales function, risks to go astray. Consequently, the sales function has to make sure that actor-specific value perceptions are known and efforts in value creation would mirror these perceptions. Aligning value creation efforts and value perception involves a longitudinal perspective, as value perceptions may change over time or while parties interact. The relevance of disclosing actors’ value perceptions for the creation of value, and the risks associated with not doing so properly, were common themes in the interviews and can be illustrated by the following quote from a sales manager:

“In that project, we hadn’t made sure to fully understand what the customer wanted from us. We developed a solution and presented it to a couple of the customer’s managers. Our solution was safe and sound, but it turned out that it was completely different from what the customer expected. Even worse, some suggestions were contrary to the customer’s culture, others ran against some
of the managers’ personal motives. We had to stop our presenta-
tion half-way and, well, were kicked out that day. Easy to imagine,
this really became a burden for our relationship."

The task of enabling mutual understanding between parties aims
at both, the mediation of heterogeneous framings and the enhance-
ment of communication. As parties may differ in their ideas of
the problem and the solution as well as in their ways of perceiving and
interpreting information, heterogeneous framings can result in ine-
effective interactions and, thus, pose a serious threat to the creation of
relationship value. For example, in a study (Lynch & O’Toole, 2010, p.
6), actors in a close collaborative relationship between supplier and
buyer highlighted the problems related to ineffective interactions:

"[T]hinking back on those initial meetings, we were not talking to
them in the right way. We were not spelling out or expressing to
them anything that would solve their problem or help them in some
way. They were probably thinking where is the value in
this for us."

"[T]he supplier had this idea of what the product should be, but
they could not express it in a manner that made sense to us. In
fact, it made no sense to us how this was going to solve our prob-
lem. We just did not understand what they were talking about."

Enhancing the communication between actors aims at finding bet-
ter modalities to communicate and influence the "picture" of the cus-
tomer about problems, solutions, and more in general the value
generated by the relationship. This reasoning can be illustrated by a
quote from a customer as presented in recent research (Corsaro &
Snehota, 2010, p. 990):

"Many suppliers are not able to use an adequate language, and this
can generate customer closure as a consequence of the perceived
supplier arrogance and unavailability."

Sales has also a key role in creating collective meanings. When
interacting, actors can both influence and be influenced by the indi-
vidual picture of the counterpart. Further, sales may find ways of
communicating to a wider audience, such as during conferences,
workshops or by making best practices public. While changing dys-
functional meanings shared between relationship partners might in-
volve intense efforts, success in such efforts is a necessary condition
for creating relationship value. The importance of collective meanings
is stressed by an interviewed salesperson:

"[W]e are now proposing not anymore on the market as a distrib-
utor, a ‘box mover’, but rather as a value-added reseller able to
provide a huge range of services, like system integrators offer.
However, when I get in touch with a new customer she still recog-
nizes me as a simple reseller; I am now putting a lot of effort in
changing this idea; every day I fight against these diffused percep-
tions which are obviously damaging me and my company".

6. Conclusive considerations

The issue that we have dealt with in this paper—how the relational
perspective on value creation in business relationships affects the
conception of the role and critical tasks of the sales function—is
broad. Our argument that the sales function has an important role
to play in creating value in supplier–buyer relationships is not partic-
ularly surprising or novel. What is surprising, however, is that sales
research has not paid much attention to the implications of the rela-
tional perspective on value creation for the sales function. The body
of research on sales’ tasks appears neither linked to the value-
creating process in business relationships nor explicit about how
sales may contribute to creating relationship value. Hence, extant lit-
erature provides no clear picture of the content of sales’ new role as
part of the value-creating process in business relationships. We
argue that a systematic linking of the relational value creating process
to the sales function’s content can provide interesting and fruitful in-
sights about criticalities and priorities in sales management. We con-
tend that it can provide an interaction-based framework of tasks
which are key to creating value in business relationships and thus
critical for sales in its hitherto neglected role as co-creator of relation-
ship value.

While recent sales research acknowledges customers potential
role as co-creators of value (Jones et al., 2005), of the content of the new
sales role as proposed in the present paper little, if at all, has
been captured in the traditional sales roles in extant literature. Never-
theless, contemporary research on sales points to several of the impli-
cations for sales that we identified above. More specifically, descriptive empirical research on sales contains several observations
of relevance for our topic and we can find various attempts to formu-
late normative recommendations regarding effective sales styles and
approaches that reflect concern with how sales may take part in pro-
ducing value in business relationships in the sales literature. We are
inclined to take these themes and concepts in extant sales research
as additional indications of support for the validity and relevance of
our framework. Table 1 reports several of the literature’s more nor-
mative recommendations that appear in line with our interaction-
based framework of sales’ role in value creation even if not explicitly
related to relational value creation.

As shown in Table 1, the concept of selling skill is related to the
feature of jointness in value creation in that it embodies an under-
standing of the customer with its markets and operations (Rentz,
Shepherd, Taschchian, Dabholkar, & Ladd, 2002), which would help
understand a potential solution’s value-in-use for the customer.
Partnering-oriented behaviors implicitly assume the task of linking
actors to be critical for value creation as it stresses the dependence
of mutually profitable solutions from salespeople’s working with their
customers and their companies (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). As
to the feature of balanced initiative, with a focus on the supplier orga-
nization, customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors implicitly
relate to identifying and activating relevant actors to improve service
delivery by the organization (Bettencourt, Brown, & Mackenzie,
2005). While the concept of salesperson listening behaviors (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997) rests on the assumption that two-way com-
munication is functional for solving the customer’s problem, effective
consultative selling (Liu & Leach, 2001) implicitly requires learning
about customer’s problems and making the customer act upon the in-
formation provided.

The feature of interactional value is indirectly stressed by various
concepts proposed in extant literature. While sales service behaviors
(Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007) are one way of ensuring ongoing in-
teractions with the customer, adaptive selling (Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan,
1986), agility selling (Chonko & Jones, 2005), and relationship selling
(Jolson, 1997) contribute to managing emergent situations. Indeed
these suggest beneficial effects of the altering of the sales behavior,
fast responses to customer’s needs, and building mutual trust, respec-
tively, for suppliers and their relationships with customers. In addi-
tion, the concept of salesperson opportunity recognition though not
explicitly linked to interactions involves the detection of potentially
valuable solutions for customer and supplier (Bonney & Williams,
2009) and the literature on negotiation (e.g., Clopton, 1984) high-
lights negotiation partners’ aim of achieving an agreement, which im-
plyically acknowledges the potential value of temporary stabilization
of evolving interactions. Finally, the concepts of customer-oriented sell-
ing (Saxe & Weitz, 1982) and relational selling behaviors (Crosby,
Evans, & Cowles, 1990) relate to the socio-cognitive nature of value
creation as these concepts stress the importance of discovering a
customer’s needs for providing an appropriate solution to the customer’s problem.

While Table 1 shows that sales research dedicates a lot of effort on various issues related to the creation of relationship value, a coherent framework to guide these efforts is lacking and the research results in a fragmented body of literature on potentially critical tasks of sales for creating customer value in business relationships. Hence, it comes as no surprise that prior research has not addressed some of sales’ key tasks for creating relationship value (see Table 1) and failed to fully capture the content of the others. This shortcoming might explain why empirical findings often stand in sharp contrast to the importance attributed to the explanatory power of the various concepts. For example, a recent quantitative synthesis of more than 100 empirical studies indicates that adaptive selling and customer-oriented selling, which are the two most prominent salesperson behaviors under investigation in the sales literature, account for 9% or less of the variance in salesperson performance (Franke & Park, 2006). We would argue that these disappointing findings result from the lack of a holistic, systematic view on the topic and is a consequence of addressing the value creation issue of the sales function mostly per assumption and not systematically. We offer such a systematic framework and see a considerable potential in studies in that direction.

Overall, we show how the sales function contributes to value creation in business relationships. Specifically, we developed an interaction-based framework of sales’ key tasks in the creation of relationship value, systematically linked the sales function to features of value-creating processes in business relationships and interpreted sales’ role in value creation from this relational perspective.

From a theoretic perspective, the present research provides a foundation for the systematic development of an interaction-based theory of value creation in business relationships and sales’ role in it. Further, it integrates value-related sales and business relationship research as well as different streams of research on salesperson tasks and behaviors. In so doing, the present research identifies a set of criticalities relevant to the creation of relationship value, and thus improves our understanding of creating relationship value and how sales can contribute to producing value in customer relationships by managing these criticalities. We show that prior research has not addressed some of sales’ key tasks for creating relationship value and failed to fully capture the content of the others, which suggests that previous disappointing findings on sales’ performance outcomes may result from not having sufficiently reflected the facets of value creation in business relationships. Overall, our study enhances the understanding of the nature of value-creating processes in business relationships and sales’ role in these processes and, thus, adds to the value-based theory of marketing (Slater, 1957).

More managerially, this research highlights important areas sales managers and salespeople should devote attention to (e.g., in terms of leadership, sales training, etc.) in their efforts to enhance sales and relationship performance. Given their importance for successful value creation in business relationships, the proposed tasks of sales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sales’ value-creating tasks</th>
<th>Related concepts (authors)</th>
<th>Concepts’ relationships to sales’ value-creating tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jointness</td>
<td>Identify key relational processes</td>
<td>Selling skill (Rentz et al., 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interface resources</td>
<td>Partnering-oriented behaviors (Weitz &amp; Bradford, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connect to value network</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced initiative</td>
<td>Identify and activate relevant actors</td>
<td>Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (Bettencourt et al., 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foster two-way communication</td>
<td>Salesperson listening behaviors (Ramsey &amp; Sohi, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enable mutual learning</td>
<td>Consultative selling (Liu &amp; Leach, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish co-leadership</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacted value</td>
<td>Facilitate interactions</td>
<td>Sales service behaviors (Ahearne et al., 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manage emergent situations</td>
<td>Adaptive selling (Weitz et al., 1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognize value-related patterns</td>
<td>Salesperson opportunity recognition (Bonney &amp; Williams, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freeze value-providing solutions</td>
<td>Negotiating behaviors (Clopton, 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-cognitive construction</td>
<td>Disclose actors’ perceptions of value</td>
<td>Customer-oriented selling (Saxe &amp; Weitz, 1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enable mutual understanding</td>
<td>Relational selling behaviors (Crosby et al., 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create collective meaning</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. NA indicates that there is no concept related to the sales’ task in extant sales research.
provide starting points for analyzing failures in the creation of relationship value. For example, firms and sales managers may use the set of key tasks suggested in our framework to assess their current strategy and sales approach with respect to the creation of relationship value. Such assessments help to identify completely or partly neglected sales force activities relevant to creating relationship value. The results also inform firms about ways to design the sales function so that it will create customer value. Thus, our study supports firms and sales managers in their efforts to provide and increase customer value, and to strengthen the firms’ competitive positions. This conceptual article also suggests avenues for future research. From a theory construction perspective, additional conceptual work may deepen the offered perspective on sales’ role (e.g., by complementing the framework; linking the framework, or parts of it, to appropriate theories and bodies of research) and develop testable propositions. Emotionally testing these propositions would then be a much-needed effort towards an empirically based theory of sales’ role in creating relationship value.


Alexander Haas is Professor of Marketing and Business-to-Business Management at the University of Graz (Austria). His research interests are in the areas of selling and sales management and marketing strategy implementation. He coauthored a book on sales management and papers in *Industrial Marketing Management* and the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, among others.

Ivan Snehota, Professor of Marketing at USI—University of Lugano (Switzerland) has held positions at Uppsala University, Stockholm School of Economics. His research interests focus on market strategy development and organization in B2B markets. He coauthored several books on business networks and papers in *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *Journal of Business Research* and *Industrial Marketing Management*.

Daniela Corsaro, Post-doctoral research fellow at University of Lugano and honorary research fellow at Manchester Business School. She received her Ph.D. from Catholic University of Milan (Italy), where she is an adjunct professor of Marketing. Her research interests are in the area of value creation, managerial cognition and interaction processes. She has published in international journals, including *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business Research* and the *IMP Journal*. 