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Creating value in business relationships: The role of sales

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ABSTRACT

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.

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 (Sheth & 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.

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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 disappointing 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 & Scanlon, 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 (Cantù, 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 the 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 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 relational 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 customer 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, Zoltners, & 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 suite 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. Interviewees' firms had numbers of employees ranging from 50 to a couple of thousands and operated in B2B settings in a variety of industries such as consulting, information technology, and telecommunication. All these companies had a well-known brand, a heterogeneous customer portfolio and operate in more than one country. We applied a theoretical sampling procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), according to which the number of interviews is dictated by the progression of theory development and not aimed at statistical significance; we selected varied cases in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The choice for semi-structured interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989) also gave the possibility to investigate more profoundly issues, which emerged as the interview progressed. Interviews were structured around the question of how a company's sales function, and the people relating to it, create value in the company's relationships with customers; at the same time, we left respondents free to tell pertinent stories and provide comments related to the main issues discussed. Interviewees were asked to focus on the relationships with higher economic return in their customer portfolio and with at least one year's length of time; in most cases they also provided actual examples in support of their points. Interviews lasted about 90 min, were recorded and transcribed. All interviews took place in supplier companies.

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.

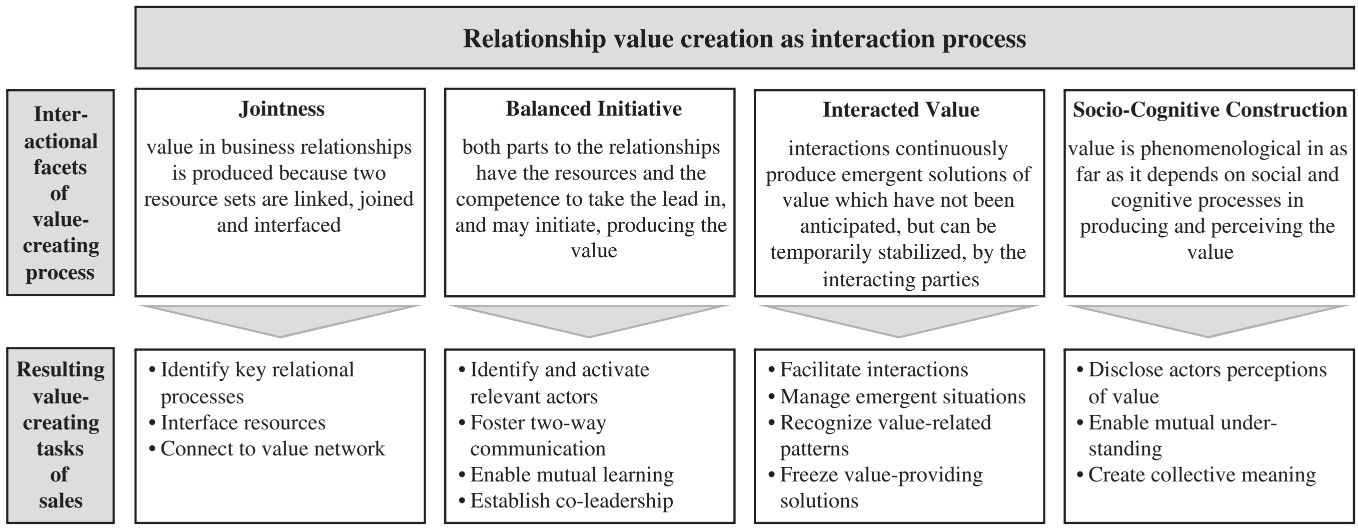
5. The role of sales in creating value in business relationships

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



Note. While presented independently, the four facets originate in the interaction process and as such are intertwined, as are derived sales´ value-creating tasks.

Fig. 1. An interaction-based framework of sales' value-creating tasks.

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 and 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 one of its laboratories available and for six months our technicians worked with the customers' specialists. I was there to coordinate the team at least two times a week. It has been more than stressful…but at the end the customer got its solution, and we added a new product to our portfolio".

Finally, there is the need to connect to the broader value network. There is the need to also see and acknowledge the interdependencies beyond the focal supplier–customer relationship for creating value. This task implies not only to reflect existing customer conditions (e.g., technology, skills, etc.) when developing solutions, but also how the two businesses (i.e., seller and customer), with their resource combinations and processes, are or would be connected in the wider network of the businesses' partners. If this is to be done by sales, the sales function would have to adopt a network perspective. Interviewed salespeople were well aware of the importance of properly connecting to the value network in value creation. For example, one salesperson stated:

> "[T]o solve the customer security problem it was necessary to develop a solution which integrated well with the other technologies already implemented by the customer. That was a very challenging project and we would never being able to accomplish it without the customer's support: the customer made all the information on its systems 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 represent a part of the value creation process which leads customer problems 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 relational 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 process of value creation, the sales function changes its role: not anymore 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 company. Balanced initiative is related to four tasks of sales, (1) identify and activate (potentially) relevant actors, (2) foster two-way communication, (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 relevant 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 following statement highlights the importance for value creation interviewed 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 people. 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 important 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 atmosphere 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 usually are functional for creating an open dialog, without "political" constraints. For example, in a study (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010, p. 990), a customer suggested:

> "The personal connections with [the supplier] make the discussions 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 necessary condition. While the sales function provides some critical resources (e.g., interpersonal skills and knowledge of the organization), salespeople also would have to learn from the customer, 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) solution together with the IT manager of one of our customer and I found it a great experience: we had chance to exchange opinions, 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 perspective, 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 salesperson declared:

> "[The customer] knows better than everyone how his processes work. Sometimes, however, my role is also to teach him about how to analyze 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 planning 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 relationship between relationship partners and how sales may change the relationship's characteristics to increase supplier–buyer interaction (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 components, 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 likelihood 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:

> "[E]very 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:

> "[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:

> "[T]he 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:

> "[I]t 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 counterpart 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:

> "[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 presentation 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 enhancement 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 ineffective 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 problem. We just did not understand what they were talking about."

Enhancing the communication between actors aims at finding better modalities to communicate and influence the "picture" of the customer 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 individual 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 dysfunctional meanings shared between relationship partners might involve 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 distributor, 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 recognizes me as a simple reseller; I am now putting a lot of effort in changing this idea; every day I fight against these diffused perceptions 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 particularly surprising or novel. What is surprising, however, is that sales research has not paid much attention to the implications of the relational 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 literature 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 insights about criticalities and priorities in sales management. We contend 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 relationship 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. Nevertheless, contemporary research on sales points to several of the implications 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 formulate normative recommendations regarding effective sales styles and approaches that reflect concern with how sales may take part in producing 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 normative 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 understanding of the customer with its markets and operations (Rentz, Shepherd, Tashchian, 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 organization, 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 communication 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 information 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 interactions 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, respectively, for suppliers and their relationships with customers. In addition, 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) highlights negotiation partners' aim of achieving an agreement, which implicitly acknowledges the potential value of temporary stabilization of evolving interactions. Finally, the concepts of customer-oriented selling (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

Table 1
Sales' value-creating tasks and related concepts in extant literature.

Sales' value-creating tasks	Related concepts (authors)	Concepts' relationships to sales' value-creating tasks
Jointness		
Identify key relational processes	Selling skill (Rentz et al., 2002)	Embodies salespeople's knowledge of customers' markets and products; knowledge of one's own company's procedures; knowledge of competitors' products, services, and sales policies; knowledge of product line; knowledge of customers' operations; and imagination in supplying products and services that meet the customers' needs
Interface resources	Partnering-oriented behaviors (Weitz & Bradford, 1999)	Refer to salespeople who work with customers and their companies to develop solutions that enhance the profits of both firms
Connect to value network	NA	–
Balanced initiative		
Identify and activate relevant actors	Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (Bettencourt et al., 2005)	Relate to boundary spanners who take individual initiative in communications to the firm and co-workers to improve service delivery by the organization, co-workers, and oneself
Foster two-way communication	Salesperson listening behaviors (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997)	Presumed to be critical for successful salespeople to build trusting, open relationships with customers
Enable mutual learning	Consultative selling (Liu & Leach, 2001)	Refers to the process of professionally providing information for helping customers take intelligent actions to achieve their business objectives
Establish co-leadership	NA	–
Interacted value		
Facilitate interactions	Sales service behaviors (Ahearne et al., 2007)	Relate to ongoing behaviors salespeople engage in after the initial sale to nurture and develop the relationship with the customer
Manage emergent situations	Adaptive selling (Weitz et al., 1986)	Refers to the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation
	Agility selling (Chonko & Jones, 2005)	Focuses on maintaining seller–buyer relationships on a daily basis by being in a position to proactively determine current and future customer needs
	Relationship selling (Jolson, 1997)	Involves the building of mutual trust within the buyer/seller dyad with a delivery of anticipated, long term, value-added benefits to buyers
Recognize value-related patterns	Salesperson opportunity recognition (Bonney & Williams, 2009)	Relates to salespeople's ability to detect a misallocation of resources, define an associated customer problem, and develop a solution that generates value for the customer and profit for the supplier
Freeze value-providing solutions	Negotiating behaviors (Clopton, 1984)	Aimed at obtaining a contract with the best possible outcome, which should reflect mutually beneficial agreements in long-term relationships
Socio-cognitive construction		
Disclose actors' perceptions of value	Customer-oriented selling (Saxe & Weitz, 1982)	Involves helping customers assess their needs
	Relational selling behaviors (Crosby et al., 1990)	Involve mutual disclosure, which relates to revealing personal and/or business-related information critical for satisfactory problem resolution
Enable mutual understanding	NA	–
Create collective meaning	NA	–

Note. NA indicates that there is no concept related to the sales' task in extant sales research.

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, 1997).

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 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. Empirically testing these propositions would then be a much-needed effort towards an empirically based theory of sales' role in creating relationship value.

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