Interpersonal influence strategies in complex B2B sales and the socio-cognitive construction of relationship value

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Bio Page

Lena Hohenschwert is a PhD in Economics from Lund University. Her PhD in the field of Industrial Marketing and Sales investigates the changes in the sales function and role as well as in the selling approach for manufacturing companies moving into the solution business. The main focus is the value creation between the individuals in these sales interactions. The PhD has been part of a research partnership with a global paper packaging manufacturer.

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<u>Research Highlights</u>
- Value is created through processes of interpretation and influence
- We apply a symbolic interactionist approach to 67 salesperson-customer interactions
- We unfold the socio-cognitive mechanisms of value construction in sales interactions
- We identify 3 new sales influence tactics: disrupt, reassure and dedicate
- We identify strategies that change, strengthen, expand customer value perceptions

Abstract

The investigation of how exactly salespeople create value at the individual level of interaction is still incomplete. Indeed, while there have been lively debates on value creation and co-creation processes at the organizational level in the business marketing literature, researchers have paid much less attention to the fact that such processes almost always start at the interpersonal level of buyer-seller interactions. Through utilizing a symbolic interactionist perspective and the ethnographic research method of shadowing, the present study moves research insights into value creation in sales forward by depicting the detailed activities and tactics that influence customers' value perceptions during the sales encounter. We complement the sales influence literature with three additional tactics: disrupt, reassure and dedicate. We also expand the framework of value creation in sales interactions by identifying three value strategies that change, strengthen or expand customer value perceptions through different socio-cognitive mechanisms.

Keywords: B2B, Sales, Value Creation, Influence Strategies, Symbolic Interactionism

1. Introduction

It has been a well-established fact that through day to day interactions with customers, the sales force represents a crucial vehicle for value creation in business to business relationships. The relational perspective of value developed over the last decade in the B2B marketing literature suggests an even greater role of salespeople in influencing buyers' perceptions of value through the sales interaction (Haas, Snehota and Corsaro 2012). While a number of researchers have recently dedicated their attention to this topic, insights into the granular activities which aim to create or indeed change perceived customer value in the sales encounter remain scarce (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos and Sager 2012).

To help fill this gap, this paper brings together two separate bodies of knowledge, namely the B2B marketing literature on value creation in sales and the research on sales influence tactics. The former has received prominence through researchers re-thinking value creating processes and acknowledging that value creation has to be partly understood at the relational, individual level of interaction in a B2B relationship (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010; Edvardsson, Tronvoll and Gruber, 2011; Grönroos, 2010; Haas et al. 2012). The latter has a long pedigree in social psychology and has recently seen an upsurge in interest from sales researchers (McFarland, Challagalla and Shervani 2006; Plouffe et al. 2014).

From these foundations this paper builds a framework to understand interpersonal influence strategies for changing customer value perceptions in B2B environments, which we also refer to as value strategies. Our conceptual point of departure is that the successful use of any influence tactic is dependent on buyer interpretations and

reactions during the sales interaction (Prus 1989). Consequently, we use a symbolic interactionist framework in order to understand the salesperson and the buyer as individuals in social dynamic interactions (Blumer 1969; Mead 1938). Social interaction is a scene for interpretation and meaning creation; thus, this perspective allows us to study the micro-level of sales interactions and specifically how salespeople and buyers shape the directions and outcomes of their interactions throughout the encounter.

This paper enriches existing research on the role of sales in creating value in business interactions as follows. First we provide an empirically detailed picture of how salespeople shape buyers' value perceptions, identifying the three new influence tactics of *disrupt*, *reassure* and *dedicate*. Second, we expand the framework of value creation as interactive and interpretive process (Edvardsson et al. 2011; Haas et al. 2012; Helkkula, Kelleher and Pihlström's 2012) by identifying three value strategies changing customer value perceptions through different socio-cognitive mechanisms. Our third contribution is methodological: we introduce the perspective of symbolic interactionism to B2B marketing and sales, which allows us to conceptualize value as negotiated in interaction. We do so through a grounded investigation based on shadowing thirteen salespeople over two consecutive work days each, analyzing in-depth a total number of 40 customer interactions.

The remainder of this paper will first position our study within the discussions in the sales and marketing literature on value creation and influence strategies. Next, we will introduce the relevant concepts of symbolic interactionism that form our theoretical perspective. An explanation of our research methodology, the shadowing

technique, precedes the data analysis, which we subsequently draw upon to formulate a conceptual framework. Managerial and theoretical contributions to value creation and influence strategies in sales conclude the article.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Value creation in sales interactions

Salespeople are considered crucial to creating business value as they are in a prominent position to understand the customer's value drivers, communicate value propositions, and provide customer insights to the own company (Blocker et al. 2012; Homburg, Wieseke and Bornemann 2009). Different contemporary approaches, such as solution, consultative, or value-based selling, have proposed models of how salespeople create value for their customers. While these approaches start from somewhat different premises, they conceptualize typical value creating activities: Identifying and solving problems, aligning and integrating resources and communicating value (propositions) (Anderson, Narus and Narayandas 2009; Terho et al. 2012; Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj 2007). The underlying assumption common to these approaches is that through activities that improve the efficiency or effectiveness of the customer, the salesperson ultimately creates (monetary) customer value.

In the B2B marketing literature, the concept of relationship value has been developed based on the argument that value is not just embodied in products or services transacted between buyers and sellers, but rather that it originates in relationships. Originally, relationship value was conceptualized in terms of the cost–benefit consequences of relationships between two parties (Ravald and Grönroos,

1996; Ulaga and Eggert, 2005; Walter, Ritter and Gemünden, 2001). Recently, scholars have started to describe value within relationships as experimental, idiosyncratic, contextual and meaning-laden (Edvardsson et al. 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Woodruff and Flint 2006) and as "ongoing, iterative circular process of individual and collective sense-making" (Helkkula, Kelleher and Pihlström's 2012: 59). This research defines relationship value and its creation processes as constructed in every interaction and perceived through an individual's interpretation of how an interaction contributes to coping with their perceived problems and situation (Ford 2011).

Few researchers have started to integrate this interpretive perspective on value and value creation into the sales context. Haas et al. (2012) conceptualize relationship value in sales to include four facets: jointness, balanced initiative, interacted value, and socio-cognitive construction. They identify high-level key sales tasks for each facet that provide an overview of the crucial role of sales in creating relationship value. Building on these authors' admonition that researchers need to understand the role of sales in the creation of interpretive value in business relationships, this paper sets out to shed further conceptual insights into how sales people can influence customer's value perceptions. In doing so, we particularly focus on the socio-cognitive construction of value as perceived by the interacting parties. We turn to two bodies of knowledge to help us shed further conceptual insights into these processes of social construction of value perceptions: the literature on (social) influence and symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Prus 1989).

2.2 Influence and interpretation in interpersonal interactions: symbolic interactionism

The symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective conceptualizes human interactions as interpretive and social (Blumer 1969; Mead 1938). It describes social interaction as people interpreting other individuals' acts and responding according to what these mean or symbolize for them (Charon 2007).The central concept of joint action (Blumer 1969) indicates that individuals make continuous adjustments to their actions and perceptions because they know that they are ultimately dependent on the other to reach their respective goals. From this perspective, an attempt to create value is a social and symbolic activity as individuals try to fit their actions towards each other based on their interpretations of their counterpart's (re)actions and perspective. Thus, during every interaction individuals make sense of their counterpart(s), objects, and the situation. This sense-making is situated but also always relates to the individuals' situation, past experiences, future plans and relevant others, such as managers, fellow employees or other customers (Charon 2007).

If we conceptualize the sales encounter according to this framework, salespeople may engage in extensive preparations in their attempts to anticipate and direct customer encounters to create relationship value, but they "are ultimately dependent on buyer interpretations and cooperation" (Prus 1989: 22). Salespeople will make assumptions of the customer's interpretation of their own situation and problem either by interpreting their actions or by adopting the customer's perspective (Charon 2007). While these salesperson activities are mostly described as intentional, they do not have to be consciously planned; they can also be ad-hoc, reactive or routine. To give an example, a salesperson might offer a cost saving solution because he or she interpreted a preceding interaction to mean that the customer contact is under

pressure to reduce costs. However, that salesperson could then encounter a negative reaction due to the customer 'misinterpreting' the solution as increased workload instead, and in that case would have to adapt to the evolving interaction.

As previously argued, the customer's value perception of an interaction with a salesperson is defined by the customer's interpretation of how this interaction contributes to them coping with the perceived problems and situation. Applying the symbolic interactionist perspective, the customer makes sense of their situation based on the interpretation of the salesperson's behaviours as well as past experiences, future plans and relevant others. Therefore, to fully grasp relationship value we have to assume that all salesperson activities can influence the customer's perception of a) the product or solution, b) the relationship with the salesperson and c) the salesperson him/herself. All these perceptions ultimately shape the customer's interpretation of the interaction as being valuable. To get a more concrete sense of what these influencing acts could be in the sales encounter, we will now turn to the body of literature on influence strategies.

2.3 Salesperson tactics to influence customer value perceptions
Traditionally, research on influence strategies has dealt with intra-organizational and inter-organizational relationships (e.g., Farell and Schroeder 1996; Venkatesh, Kohli, and Zaltman 1995). McFarland et al. (2006: 104) have called for a third layer of research within influence strategies, namely the "inter-organizational, person-to-person relationship in which the unit of analysis is the individual relationship". The researchers apply Frazier and Summer's (1984) widely established taxonomy of influence tactics as used in channel and other marketing research to the context of

personal selling, and more specifically adaptive selling. While they find the tactics of information exchange, recommendations, promises and (less effectively) threats used in a sales context, requests and legalistic pleas do not seem to be employed. However, as Table 1 shows, they add ingratiation (e.g., Spiro and Perreault 1979; Strutton, Pelton, and Tanner 1996) and inspirational appeals (Yukl and Tracey 1992) to salespeople's influence tactics.

=========INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE=========

Testing the above taxonomy, McFarland et al. (2006) find that while extant literature links the identified tactics to specific buying orientations such as task, self or interaction orientation, buyers seldom have one dominant orientation and consequently different tactics could work in different situations. Plouffe et al.'s (2014) study on selling styles and influence tactics also finds an element of contingency in a seller's choice of influence strategies: "it is the mix of ingredients *and how they are used* that achieves the desired outcomes" (p. 142, original emphasis). Clearly, when it comes to influence strategies in personal selling situations, research needs to acknowledge the ability of buyers to shape the directions and outcomes of salespeople's influence tactics within the situation itself, instead of depicting customers as passive 'targets' of such strategies.

This paper therefore considers salesperson influence tactics not as situation-independent and premeditated compliance gaining tactics, as the original literature suggested (Frazier and Summers, 1984) but rather as used dynamically in the salesperson's attempt to make the sales encounter valuable. Influence tactics, in our

definition, are thus 'interpersonal accomplishments' (Prus 1989). Salesperson activities and behaviors have the potential to influence customer's perceptions of three value 'layers': of a product or solution, of the relationship with the salesperson and of salesperson him or herself. For instance through influence tactics such as information exchange, the salesperson can simultaneously influence the customer's interpretation of their own situation and how the interaction contributes to customers coping with it. This in turn influences the customer's value perception of the product or service as value is interpreted based on the meaning a person attaches to an object, subject or its actions in an interaction (Prus 1989).

3. Research Method

Extant research on salespeople's value creation activities has relied heavily on verbal accounts in the form of surveys or interviews (Haas et al. 2012; Terho et al. 2012). True to the idea that people's acts are socially situated and therefore situation-dependent, we aimed to study value creation through first hand observations of all the routine and non-routine, conscious or less conscious behaviors that make up the sales encounter (Blumer 1969; Charon 2007).

From the range of ethnographic observation techniques, we chose the shadowing technique, following salespeople throughout their working days to the different places they visit and be present in their meetings with different people. Introduced by Mintzberg's (1973) famed doctoral study on the nature of managerial work and since taken up by a number of management studies (e.g. Perlow 1999), the technique is still rarely used in marketing and sales research, with most examples in consumer studies (e.g. Heisley and Levy 1991; Ulver-Sneistrup, Askegaard and Kristensen

2011). Shadowing is ideal for researchers wishing to find out what a practitioner actually 'does' in their working day without having to rely on their verbal accounts only (Czarniawska 2007). Unlike other qualitative methods such as action research, shadowing not only allows researchers to observe relevant behaviors and reactions, it also enables them to take the research participant's perspective by literally acting as their 'shadow' throughout the work day. It is at once a research method that enables the researcher to get 'up close and personal' with the research participant, but also allows for structured observation and questioning (Mintzberg 1973). As a 'shadow', the researcher tries to be as self-effacing as possible. When asking research participants questions about what has been observed, the researcher's task is to encourage a 'stream of consciousness' type reflection, which gives some insight into how research participants themselves make sense of their work (McDonald 2005; Czarniawska 2007).

In our study, the salespersons' narratives and accounts prior to and after the customer encounter helped the researchers understand the salesperson's perspective and the reasons for their behaviors. Understanding the sense-making behind the observed behavior allowed us to draw conclusions on the influence tactics and value creation strategies used. At the same time, we could observe the customer's actions and reactions and understand them in relation to the salesperson's acts, so both individual behaviors and joint action were captured. In addition, shadowing, also dubbed "fieldwork on the move" (Czarniawska 2007: 17), allowed us to follow and observe the salesperson in action across several customer sites on their daily travels.

It should be mentioned that with all types of personal observation or interviewing techniques, there is a risk of the research participant engaging in impression management or, to put it more colloquially, 'faking it' in front of the observing researcher. However, as shadowing requires prolonged observations throughout the participant's normal daily activities, this risk is much less significant than in shorter exposures between researcher and research participant or in more contrived observational settings. In our fieldwork, we were alert to but did not note any prolonged instances of this behavior.

3.1 Data collection

To remain true to our conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism, our unit of analysis was the individual-level buyer-seller interaction. At a paper packaging firm, Company A, the researchers shadowed 13 salespeople over two consecutive work days each observing a total number of 67 customer interactions. 40 of these interactions are subject to in-depth analysis in this paper (see section 3.2 for choice criteria). Company A is the second largest paper packaging provider in Europe. It promotes the idea of service and solution business to counteract the profit squeeze in the face of commoditization (Raddats and Easingwood 2010). The company is thus a good example of the many B2B firms that rely on salespeople creating a valuable sales encounter for the customer to be successful in business. It further serves to exemplify the concept of complex B2B sales processes, as solution sales in the packaging industry entails integration into the customer production processes and involvement of several stakeholders.

The reason for sampling sales interactions within a sales force of one company was to prevent too much variability of organizational-level factors, such as country, industry, company structure and management. Greater differences at those levels would have made it more difficult to compare across individual-level sales interactions. The group of nine German and four Austrian salespeople shadowed consisted of two strategic account managers who are responsible for one or two customers only, five key account managers who are responsible for bigger customers that might need a wider network of different plants, and six account managers. Access was secured through a research cooperation and a presentation of the research project to the firm's' Senior Management.

A typical day of shadowing started with the salesperson collecting the researcher on the way to the first meeting of the day. During that time, the shadower presented herself and described her interest in sales interactions; the salesperson then usually talked about their plans for the day or upcoming days. After some questions about their background and their typical customers, the conversation often turned to more specific issues with and projects of the customer to be visited. The remainder of the day evolved differently with each salesperson and every new day. At the customer site the salesperson usually presented the shadower to the customer as a researcher writing about sales. Sometimes the customer asked some questions or wanted to know more detail but mostly they got to the reason for the meeting right away. Sometimes at the beginning or at the end of the meeting, during 'small talk', the shadower became involved in the interaction through questions from the salesperson or customer.

Where possible, interactions with customers and internal colleagues as well as running commentaries were recorded, transcribed and subsequently translated from German to English (both researchers are fully bilingual). Otherwise, careful field notes were taken. The data consisted of observations, explanatory commentaries, salespeople's stories about customer and internal interactions that they recounted throughout the day either because they preceded the observed interaction, or because the observed interaction reminded them of these.

3.2 Data analysis

From the total of 67 observed customer interactions, 11 were omitted as they were not face-to-face and/or too short to provide input to the study (<10 minutes). Further, our sample of 13 salespeople was divided by the management of Company A into 3 top performers, 6 core performers and 4 low performers based on their contribution margin and revenue figures as percentage of the team performance. The contribution margin in the given industry and company is the closest measure showing salespeople's influence on the price and therefore captures a measure of economic value creation. It is important to note that the purpose of this study was not primarily to identify performance driving behaviors. However, we chose to include a performance variable in the data analysis for two reasons: Firstly, Plouffe et al. (2014) have recently admonished researchers to no longer ignore performance data as an indicator of what influence tactics 'work'. Secondly, having access to performance data allowed us to put behaviors that could be considered best practice in creating value into starker relief by focusing on the activities of top and core performers (or what we call below 'value-oriented salespeople'). It is thus the 40

customer interactions of these value-oriented salespeople that we report on in our empirical section below.

In order to move from the mass of accumulated field data to empirically grounded constructs to more analytical ones, we used two phases of coding; initial and focused coding (Charmaz 2006). In the initial coding phase we took care to stay close to the empirical material and grouped individual activities observed into meaningful groups. Interjudge agreement was achieved by first coding all relevant data instances separately, and then comparing through the data management tool NVivo. During the focused coding phase, we independently compared and contrasted the empirical activity categories with the influence tactics identified as relevant to sales by extant literature. On this basis, we categorized those activities that fit into influence categories described by the literature. The remaining activities were grouped into provisionally unlabeled categories, until we jointly analyzed those empirical codes and agreed on preliminary labels for additional influence tactics. We compared our interpretations of salespeople acts with the analysis of their running commentaries to challenge and validate our newly identified influence tactics as well as the broader categories that we call value strategies.

3.3 Trustworthiness of the study

From an interpretive perspective, achieving research that is valid, trustworthy and credible requires the researcher to: first, have an intimate familiarity with the research setting; second, present a fair account of the voices participating in the study; third, provide sufficient empirical evidence for the claims; and fourth, do not

overlook outliers and counter-intuitive examples (Charmaz 2006; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Silverman and Marvasti 2008).

The first criterion was achieved by an in-depth study of the company's context. Before shadowing, several management interviews as well as participation at sales training sessions helped us understand the current dynamics affecting the sales organization as well as the industry and the company's products and production capabilities. Second, the shadowing technique provided us with a continuous exposure to the research subjects' lived realities and an opportunity to seek feedback on our evolving understanding of the field data over time. Third, extensive field notes, recordings and field diaries were taken to support our claims. Due to space constraints, only a sample of this data can be provided below. Fourth, we used the constant comparative method that is comparing any newly analyzed cases against existing analytical categories, to ensure that we would notice and analyze outliers adequately.

4. Salesperson influence on customer value perceptions

The data from 40 customer encounters provides us with a sound basis for our interpretation of the influence work and the construction of relationship value that takes place in the real-time of the sales encounter. In our analysis we group the different influence tactics and value creating activities that value-oriented salespeople use into three strategies, which we identify as changing, strengthening or expanding their customer's value perceptions. We summarize our empirical findings in Table 2 and expand on them below.

=====INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE==========

4.1 Changing customer value perceptions

The material suggests that in many sales situations the customer has a clear idea of what they want to get out of the sales meeting and tends to drive the interaction, expecting the salesperson to cooperate. Depending on whether the sales interaction is a first meeting or a continuation of previous ones, the customer might want to understand product specifics and prices, order a particular product, find a solution to a specific issue or initiate changes in product development. While the data suggests that salespeople generally tend to act in line with these customer expectations, it also shows how value-oriented salespeople try to actively influence their customer's value perceptions in a way that reframes the customer situation and problem interpretation. Activities that shape the customer's perception of a solution imply a change in value perception as value is interpreted based on the meaning an individual attaches to an object or subject (Prus 1989). The influence tactics that salespeople use to reframe customer perspectives are <u>information exchange, recommend and disrupt</u>. The following vignette exemplifies a process where a salesperson (Christian) combines these different influence tactics in one relatively short sales interaction with a purchasing manager:

On the way to a customer meeting a salesperson introduces the upcoming sales encounter as difficult as there are two issues on the table: discussing the price increases as well as a new product development that he believes will benefit the customer in one of the categories. He has been working with this customer for many years and knows that the customer is focused on price as one of his key performance measures as purchaser. After they have finalized the price discussion and the purchaser said he would go back and compare the new prices with competitors' prices, the salesperson presents his product development, an angular shaped liner for a bag-in-box packaging.

Christian: "This means getting away from the tubular bag, it becomes angular. Here, you can easily see it does not have the long seam so it cannot break or burst that easily and adjusts perfectly into the box."

Purchasing Manager: 'Is it the format we had before? I mean for the 10 liters?'

C: 'Yes. So because it adjusts better we need less static support that means we could reduce the quality of the box material.'

PM: 'Yes that would be good if we could save there. How much does this liner cost?'

C: '50-55 per cent.'

PM: 'That is twice as much as the current one.'

C: 'Yes, one could think that. But if you can save that amount on the paper quality of the box, we emerge plus minus zero. And if you then get a better visual appearance and overall quality for the packaging then we have a win-win situation. You cannot compare only the liner prices.'

PM: 'No, sure, we cannot compare it one to one, we have to look at the whole picture.'

C: 'So if we agree that the bag in box at the moment is in terms of quality…'

PM: '…at the borderline, yes.'

C: 'If we emerge plus minus zero and the packaging stands properly on the pallet and is not borderline any more, then we make a good deal!'

The customer makes the commitment to test the samples for a few weeks before making the final decision.

This excerpt can be used to show that a vital influence tactic of salespeople intending to change the customer's interpretation of their situation is to <u>disrupt</u> the customer's existing perception. This could be done by intentionally acting differently to what the customer requested in order to reframe his/her situation and how they deal with it. A central part of this reframing is <u>information exchange</u> (Frazier and Summers 1984); that is, educating the customer about the customer business or particular benefits of a solution with relevance to the customer's situation and business.

Often linked to the information exchange is a <u>recommendation</u> (Frazier and Summers 1984) that suggests particular action related to the realization of the

benefits explained previously, in this case the substitution of the old packaging with a new one. Hence, by introducing new information to the customer and recommending a beneficial action to the customer based on this new insight the salesperson influences the customer to re-interpret their own situation as problematic. The interaction above exemplifies a situation where the purchasing manager is not considering their own situation as particularly problematic until the salesperson, Christian, reframes the main focus of interpretation. The interaction shows how Christian constructs a setting of *'improvement'*, but he does so by comparing the current situation as *'problematic'* with the potential of improvement in the form of *'winning'* and *'optimizing the whole packaging'*. Besides using terminology that has an established meaning of improvement, Christian also tries to influence the customer in seeing and acknowledging his own problem in a new light ('If we can agree…'), especially once he realizes that the customer starts accepting his articulation of the problem ('…at the borderline, yes', 'Sure, if we can improve it that would be good.'). Christian creates a vision of a joint improvement effort - he refers to 'we' throughout the entire interaction. We may also note the use of the future perfect to frame that improvement as if it were a *fait accompli.*

A second excerpt also shows this dynamic use of the disrupt-exchange information-recommend triptych:

Meeting a product developer from a company in what the salesperson, Edward, describes as a very price sensitive industry, he brings a packaging sample that he has developed based on a briefing in a previous meeting.

Edward: 'I had a look at the design and I felt there was too much waste of space and material. Besides, this brown material on the inside of the small boxes is against the [supermarket X] regulations.'

Product Developer: 'But in our packaging process, we first pack the product into the small boxes and then package them into this bigger box.'

At first, the product developer interprets the salesperson's suggestion as a change to his internal packaging processes, which could mean more work or internal discussions and problems, and this explains the customer's initial resistance. Throughout the course of the conversation, there are several iterations of Edward contradicting the customer more or less subtly:

Edward: 'OK, I don't mind doing it the way you want. No actually, I don't like doing it because I don't think it makes sense.'
Product Developer: 'Do you still have the sample of the initial construction? Then, please make a sample for both the initial design and your suggested one and I can present both.'
E: 'I am thinking that it might actually be enough space to simply redesign the smaller boxes to fit into the outer packaging with the optimized pallet size.'
PD: 'That would be great.

The course of this interaction shows that the greatest concern in that moment for the product developer seems to be the extra work or potential internal trouble that any major changes may involve, and he would have appreciated to simply get the same packaging again. However, Edward believes that the customer a) would appreciate cost reductions because of the price sensitive industry and b) wants to follow the supermarket regulations. Thus he dares to strongly contradict and challenge the customer in this interaction. Edward reflects after the meeting:

'Of course you could say, "If you say so, dear customer, I'll do it", but that's stupid (…) I don't necessarily provide the product the way the customer tells me to, instead I try to imagine the best solution (…) [the customer] usually likes it.

By first providing new insight, such as the supermarket regulations, contradicting the product developer and finally presenting a solution that integrates both the

developer's requirement and Edward's suggested cost reduction, he seems to influence the customer into accepting the solution. Throughout the dialogue, Edward and the product developer negotiate the meaning of improvement for this particular customer situation, arriving at a collective understanding of improvement being a cost reduction that does not cause internal process changes.

Disrupt, exchange information and recommend are often variously combined to change customers' value perception of the interaction assuming the customer's desire for improvement. The means to disrupt an existing interpretation of a situation is often to provide new insights and once the customer perceives the existing situation as problematic, the salesperson provides a recommendation to influence the customer's perception of the interaction as helpful in coping with the newly perceived challenge.

4.2 Strengthening customer value perceptions

In interactions where the customer asks for help, for instance when facing stress or uncertainty in day-to-day decision making, value-oriented salespeople try to strengthen the customer's perception that the interaction with the salesperson can help them cope with problematic situations. Hence, salespeople engage in behaviors that confirm and reinforce the customer's perception of the sales relationship as assisting them with making the right decisions and meeting their goals. Two key tactics are employed are <u>reassuring</u> and <u>promising</u>. These tactics simultaneously strengthen the customer's view of the salesperson's expertise and ability to support him/her, and create a feeling in the customer that he is not being left alone with the issue at hand.

Typical examples are those where salespeople have established themselves as expert in the relationship and get contacted by customers to help them solve their problems. Problem diagnosis and solving have previously been described as value creating activities (Rackham and DeVincentis, 1999; Terho et al., 2012; Tuli et al., 2007). We find that in these situations, salespeople's influence tactic of reassuring the customer has an equally important emotional as cognitive function. Salespeople's activities, such as educating the customer to understand their problems and involving them in brainstorming towards a solution, shaping the customer's perception of the interaction as valuable as they help them cope with problematic situations. These tactics influence the customer's interpretation of the relationship as providing access to trusted expertise and thus decrease their perceptions of risk.

The following customer meeting serves to exemplify this argument. While the marketing manager has a fairly good idea of the problem, he is unsure about how to approach the issue when meeting Adam, the salesperson:

Adam sits down at a table in the entrance hall when the marketing manager of his customer comes down with a writing block and a small paper construction he has made in the shape of a round staircase to exemplify an idea for a store display. The two come straight to the point:

Marketing manager: 'I had an idea here (shows the little paper display). I think it is something that is pretty hard to construct, right? But if you change this part (pointing at the paper display) would it be easier?'

A: (shakes his head without saying anything)

MM: 'No really not?'

A: 'I see one problem, we get the round shapes but the material we use for your displays is pretty thin and it does not have the resistance that is needed.'

MM: Hmm, OK, the material needs to be thinner to bend the stairs but then everything becomes unstable.'

The discussion continues for about another twenty minutes. Throughout the following conversation Adam and the marketing manager brainstorm about several options for constructing the design idea. With every proposal Adam explains the different technical reasons for why the different constructions have disadvantages and advantages. The final suggestion from Adam meets agreement from the marketing manager.

MM: 'That sounds good! It would also have the advantage that it looks good when people see it from standing behind the display and not only from the front. I'm beginning to like the idea.'

A: 'The effort is also not that big, I imagine, and it is definitely more possible than the initial idea.'

MM: 'OK, then I will present this idea internally. It is always bad if you present it before you know whether the construction is possible because afterwards the idea is signed off even if it's not feasible and then you can't build the display.'

A: 'I think it is possible. Once you are ready we can start with the design.'

The meeting finishes with discussing the next steps and timelines of bringing this project further.

This extract shows that the salesperson tries to influence the customer's interpretation of the situation in two ways. The marketing manager first signals to Adam that he wants to learn from him. As a reaction, Adam engages in the technical brainstorm with the marketing manager and explains the answers in detail. The value perception lies in the meaning that the marketing manager attaches to the meeting in relation to his goal of a smooth internal project. Based on his statements the interaction seems to give the marketing manager the needed ammunition to succeed internally or at least the feeling of assurance that he is well equipped to bring this project further.

The following interaction exemplifies those salesperson activities that influence the customer's interpretation by signaling willingness to help overcome a problem and reassure the customer at an emotional level in the possibility of achieving his/her goal.

Marcus drives to the owner of a small intermediary packaging provider who is facing the challenge that his customer is changing packaging that is already in production. They sit down at the kitchen table and get coffee and cake. After some small talk the owner shows Marcus the new requirements of his customer, including the printing layout. He explains that his customer, a market leading discounter, has worked together with Company A's main competitor on a strategy and the competitor created standard designs and prints for all fruit and vegetable trays for supermarkets. Together they think about how they can minimize the potential damage. They agree that the owner takes up the discussion with his customer (the discounter) with the aim that the running packaging production can still be used. For the order that has not yet started in production, Marcus promises to find a quick way to produce the trays with the new print layout required.

Marcus's comment after the visit shows that he considers it important to prove to the owner that they will do everything necessary in a crisis situation. Marcus elaborates afterwards:

'Most of our work is done in this project and changing the packaging requirements now could become really expensive for him [owner] so we needed to find a way to decrease his risk.'

As seen in this interaction, <u>promises</u> (Frazier and Summers 1984) that decrease the customer's emotional uncertainty are an important influence tactic in B2B sales, based of course on the trust built up by the previous relational history. Boris's story suggests another situation where the customer is facing a troubling situation and his attempt to help lies in promising her to get her out of trouble quickly. This interaction is different from the ones before, because the customer does not actively seek assistance; however, her acts leave little doubt that she is facing a problematic and

rather emotionally charged situation, where Boris is called up to be part counselor, part category expert.

'Mr. Hekel initially asked me to meet him that day but then he could not make it, so I had to go and talk to his colleague in a different product category. I knocked on her door for the first time and she snarled at me. She was super condescending towards me. At that moment while we were talking, a packaging claim made its way in, delivered by one of their other suppliers. She looks at the packaging and just throws it at my feet and says [in an ironic tone] 'I am sure you could have done that just as well'. I answered [in an equally ironic tone] 'No, we can't deliver such great quality'. She says that she needed that packaging [in the right quality] right away. I just asked her for a minute and went outside to make a phone call. I went in again and said that I could get it for her tomorrow. I was so lucky that they really could supply the packaging from one day to the next. Since that incident I do not need to ask for an appointment anymore, and they call me if they need help.'

This section has shown the two influence tactics of reassuring and making promises aimed to influence the customer's interpretation of the situation when simultaneously addressing the cognitive and emotional dimensions of their uncertainty. Such uncertainty kicks in when customers see their ability to achieve their business goals at risk, whether that is a new product development, achieving KPIs or simply keeping their business running. Hence, salespeople use the named tactics to make sure that the customer considers the interaction with the salesperson as a means to reducing such uncertainty and achieving these goals.

4.3 Expanding customer value perceptions

Our research shows that a great proportion of salesperson value creating activities are not driven by customer requests or actions in the sales encounter but anchored in routines that salespeople anticipate to be valuable for the customer. This finding is supported by the notion that customers have expectations and needs that they do not explicitly communicate. With these acts salespeople aim to increase the salesperson's attractiveness as future interaction partner. The dominant influence tactics that value-oriented salespeople use in these instances are <u>ingratiate</u> and

dedicate. While the former aims to create a feeling of gratitude with the customer, doing extra work to decrease the customer's workload or doing them favors of different kinds, the latter tactic describes those activities that primarily aim to make the customer feel important and valued; these activities mostly relate to time, devotion and availability. Often, salespeople do so with activities that influence the customer's feeling of their work life being easier during or after the interaction with the customer. These activities could be categorized under the influence tactic of ingratiation (Spiro and Perreault 1979). The following accounts describe examples of the salesperson, George, proactively deploying resources to influence the technical director's interpretation of her situation and of the sales interaction.

In a meeting that George has with the technical director, her boss calls and asks whether George could organize a machine for the assembly of trays – even though he sells packaging materials, not packaging machines. George tells the director about the phone call afterwards:

D: Steinman [a co-packer] needs sixty glasses per minute; you guys have only 30, now Mr. Harz [technical director's boss] asks me if I can get him a machine that assembles the trays.

TD: 'Oh no.'

D: 'I know but he thinks that with a machine tray he will save materials, so that the prices come down to the old levels again. If you send me the article numbers I can do the calculation, old costs, costs with an automatic tray, costs with a manual tray.'

George calls one of his contacts, a machine expert, and checks if he could get such a machine. By chance he has a second-hand machine on site that fits the description. George calls Mr. Harz again, tells him about it and offers to let him have a look at it. After the boss tells George when he is available, George tries several times to get back to his internal contact to warn him that he needs to prepare the machine in time. After he finally gets through, George is very happy about the arrangement. He seems a bit sour about the fact that salespeople do not benefit from machine sales because SCAP does not sell machines; however, he seems to console himself:

'I don't do anything else but reduce Mr. Harz' costs with his co-packer, so you could say, "whatever, I only make sales of 30 000 Euro with these trays". But it is about what lies behind it that counts, that guy is responsible for two more plants and is really valuable!'

Salespeople often experience their customers being stressed and challenged in their work life. They anticipate that using the sales encounter to support them in their daily work will influence the customer's interpretation of this interaction. Besides the hope that these favors are met by the customer's gratitude and 'pay back' through an act of reciprocity, the salesperson's key intention is to influence the customer's interpretation of the sales interaction as irreplaceable or at least as recognizably missing when managing the day-to-day business. Another example follows.

After a customer visit, Adam shows me folders that are organized according to the different product categories and contacts. The reports hold the names of those people involved in a packaging project, the tasks to carry out and responsibilities, a drawing or picture of the design and other information. He explains that he always structures the details so that the customer can easily see the status of the project and the tasks that are to be done. In several interactions between Adam and his contacts, they had a print out of his meeting report and used it to refer back to certain discussed issues. He explains:

'The less work you create for them the happier they are. Corrugated paper is only one part of their concept … If you manage to take on one product group, they are happy. Humans are naturally lazy. They want someone who shoulders their workload, someone they can rely on. (…) It is not because they like me so much, but because they know that I do the work for them.'

Even though the reports are evidently also Adam's own tool to keep track and monitor work responsibilities, he considers this task as more important for the customer, and customer reactions have in the past shown how much they appreciate it. Other types of activities aim to create a similar feeling in the customer of the interaction as crucial for coping with the day-to-day situations, as the following excerpt illustrates.

On the way to a customer meeting, Fred explains that he is meeting a new contact who has changed jobs within the customer company and is now employed as developer. Fred explains that the contact called him to ask if he could teach him something about corrugated packaging, a material field that he does not know much about. Before the meeting, Fred says:

'There is no specific subject for the meeting; it is just about creating a good atmosphere. And it is of course good if the developer knows a lot because then when we speak the same language it is easier for us to communicate.'

Fred brought along a written presentation and a box with different corrugated materials. He starts off with a short presentation on SCAP and simple facts about corrugated materials. After that he goes through the different materials and explains the different paper qualities and corrugated wave types. The customer is very keen to understand the specifications so that that he can order them and the supplier will understand what he is asking for. Afterwards in the car Fred says that in his experience these things always 'generate a return' because next time when this contact has a new project he will remember Fred who explained everything to him very carefully.

Activities such as those described above serve the salesperson to increase their attractiveness as helpful reliable business partner. Dedicate is a related tactic that aims to increase the salesperson's own attractiveness. This tactic describes those salesperson acts that aim to influence the customer's sense of importance by devoting knowingly scarce resources to the customer. Marcus' story shows the symbolic use of the watch to create a social and emotional appreciation of the interaction with the customer:

'I do not have a watch. I broke the habit of wearing one. As soon as you have one you look at it and there is nothing worse than sitting with the customer and looking at the watch. The most important thing for the customer is your time. (…) One time the purchasing manager told me, after I asked him why he didn't show the briefing to the other colleague from the competition, "Nah, why should I show him? He doesn't have time for it anyway."'

In the above quote Marcus, the salesperson, describes the symbolic act of not looking at the watch, which in his eyes signals a lack of respect and appreciation of the customer. Little gestures of devotion in the day-to-day interaction are important tactics in influencing the customer's value perception. In the case above Marcus' habit of not revealing time pressure to the customer earns him the customer's trust

and leads to being asked for help in projects that the customer feels do not gain enough attention from other suppliers. By using these gestures of dedication, in form of time spent or demonstrating availability and flexibility to the customer, the intention is to expand those elements customer interprets as valuable parts of the interaction and how it contributes to reaching their own goals. The salesperson Karl mentions:

'Mr. Hautz from the technical department starts at 6.30, Marketing starts at 10. Some are finished at 5, others at 10pm in the evening, they don't care when you get up. They want to get a hold of you. That means that this little mobile is always with me, even at dinner; my son and my wife got used to it.'

Thus, the strategy of expanding value perceptions includes different types of activities that particularly focus on influencing the customer's interpretation of the salesperson as valuable, summarized in the two influence tactics of ingratiate and dedicate. These tactics are predominantly aimed at the emotional and social elements of perceived value, aiming to influence customer's perception of the salesperson as irreplaceable partner in coping with the daily demands of their job.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of the Findings

To summarize, we identified three distinct value strategies through which salespeople attempt to influence their customers' value perceptions and categorized them as change, strengthen and expand. Within these broad strategies, we found a range of specific behaviors, some of which have been identified previously by researchers in less complex sales settings (information exchange, recommendation, promises, ingratiate), while others have not yet been described in detail (reassure and dedicate). In line with the stream of research that considers the sales interaction as a process of value creation (Haas et al. 2012), we described in our analysis

strategies and tactics from the salesperson perspective but as they were enacted in the interaction with the customer. We illustrate our empirical findings presented above in a conceptual framework in Figure 1 below.

This Figure demonstrates that while some tactics are particularly characteristic for one strategy, salespeople use the same tactics for different strategic intentions. Information exchange for instance is such a basic sales behavior that we found it across our three value strategies. Moreover, as Table 2 indicates, at the level of customer interaction salespeople can pursue individual influence tactics through engaging in a range of different activities. What specifies and demarcates each value strategy are the differing socio-cognitive processes in how the salesperson influences customer's value perception of the interaction, relationship, salesperson and/or solution. As we identified, this can be by a) reframing the customer's perspective to focus on a different subject matter for evaluation (change), b) decreasing the customer's perceived uncertainty (strengthen) or c) provoking the customer's feeling of the salesperson's irreplaceability (expand).

=====INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE==========

Salespeople try to **change** their customers' value perceptions in situations where they interpret the customer not to perceive enough value in the intended solution or existing relationship. Since value is perceived with reference to their current situation or problem and the contribution of the interaction in solving this problem or improving the situation (Ford 2011; Ford and Mouzas 2013), indicating a different angle to a problem that is relevant for the customer contact can change their value perception. Where several interests shape an individual's interpretations of their situations and

potential problems, the resulting value ambiguity offers an angle for influence. Hence, this strategy is mainly aimed at influencing the customer to perceive a drawback in their current situation by providing new insights, and when the existing perception is in flux, the salesperson recommends an improved new situation for the customer.

The influence tactics of information exchange and recommendations have previously been discussed in the influence strategy literature (Frazier and Summer 1984) and in personal selling contexts where the seller provides the customer with information on product features and benefits. Research shows that in complex sales situations salespeople are 'knowledge brokers' (Rapp, Bachrach, Panagopoulos and Ogilvie 2014) in a broader sense as they influence and shape customer cognitive processes throughout the interaction and in a more comprehensive manner, often beyond product features. More recently, the concept of challenger selling has provided a process model in which the salesperson reframes the customer situation in order to create motivation for change (Dixon and Adamson 2011). These related concepts from existing sales literature as well as our own analysis show that the disrupt/inform/recommend triptych of changing customers' value perceptions is mostly situated at a cognitive level, even though the behaviors are still firmly embedded in the sales interaction. Psychologists also have found 'disrupt-then-reframe' to be a valuable influence tactic in consumer settings (Fennis, Das and Pruyn 2004). Interestingly, however, they have linked this specific influence tactic to 'mindless' buying behaviors, where semi-automatic low involvement processes are disrupted, and Dixon and Adamson too have related it to creating tension and pressure on the customer rather than building value in the longer term (Rapp et al.

2014). By contrast, because it encourages cognitive reappraisal, we have found this tactic to be of great significance to complex solution sellers in conjunction with information exchange and recommendation. To the current discussion over the merits of the challenger sale (Rapp et al. 2014), we can thus add that disrupting and reframing the way customers think is indeed a valuable influence strategy when aimed at product or solution value perceptions, but it should be seen in the context of the overall relationship value rather than as an isolated sales ploy.

Salespeople attempt to **strengthen** their customers' value perception when they reinforce anticipated value perceptions of the interaction and alleviate any fears on the customer's part that their goals might not be attained. This strategy often seems not so much related to reassurance of product or solution performance, but rather to reinforcing that the relationship itself carries enough value to hedge against any eventuality. Empirically, we found two specific types of behaviors that salespeople engaged in to put their customers at ease (see Figure 1): reassurance and promises, with only the latter previously studied by the influence literature. In a B2B value selling context, we found making promises to be one of many behaviors that aim to reassure customers in the supplier relationship as well as in their own decision making. Especially in complex B2B sales with longer sales cycles and solutions that entail greater changes in the customer business, customers perceive greater risk at certain phases of their buying process. Salespeople in these types of sales situations must ensure to reinforce the customer's perception of value in the encounter. Reassuring and promising behaviors are aimed directly at decreasing customer perceived uncertainty and risk to advance decisions, and this happens at an emotional as well as at a cognitive level. Need and market uncertainty have been

identified in early interaction research to be key components for organizational influence strategies (Håkansson and Johanson 1977). In today's markets however, customers are increasingly knowledgeable when they enter supplier relationships (Rapp et al. 2014). Consequently, customers' uncertainty pertains most often to internal performance pressures, which provides salespeople with an opportunity to reassure the customer that they will provide the insight and emotional support needed so that they can achieve their company as well as their personal goals.

A final value change strategy is to **expand** customers' value perceptions from the immediate interaction and solution to the individual salesperson as future interaction partner. Here, we found behaviors salespeople engage in to make themselves irreplaceable; ingratiation and dedication. Ingratiation has been defined as behaviors 'designed to enhance one's interpersonal attractiveness' (Kumar and Beyerlein 1991). Unlike the fast-moving contexts in which McFarland et al. (2006) and Plouffe et al. (2014) observed these behaviors, in our case ingratiation was less about praising a customer or expressing attitude similarity and more about making customers' lives easier. Similarly but even more noticeably, salespeople engaged in behaviors of dedication for instance by expending time (their scarcest resource) to signal to the customer how important and valuable they are to the salesperson. While perhaps difficult to quantify in economic terms, the salespeople we shadowed seem convinced that this direct, personal value-add of 'watching the customers' back' made a clear and perceptible difference to the customer. Similarly to the tactics observed within the value strengthening strategy, influence tactics ultimately serve to suggest to the customer that he or she is better off with the salesperson as relationship partner, trusted advisor and as dedicated resource. Among our three

value change processes, this is the one that is most anchored in interpersonal emotional processes.

In sum, and in line with recent findings (Corsaro 2014; Haas et al. 212) our findings demonstrate clearly that value is phenomenological, as perceived in the context of individual and collective sense-making. Thus cognitive, social and emotional processes overlap to create something like a 'value Gestalt'. In complex sales encounters that oftentimes have no tangible product as point of reference, salesperson and customer actions and reactions are the crucial focus for collective meaning creation. Any attempt on the part of salespeople to change customers' value perceptions is therefore partly a cognitive endeavor of changing value 'thinking', but also embedded both in the context of the social relationship and intrinsically bound to interpersonal emotions. Thus, in complex selling situations where individual interactions are embedded in a longitudinal relationship, value truly is relational in nature.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

Our theoretical contributions fall into two areas of sales research: salesperson value creation and influence strategies. To our knowledge, this is also the first study that brings these two lines of inquiry together in an empirical exploration.

Our contribution to the value discussion in sales is related to the notion of value as emerging from an interaction process between actors and as experiential and contextual (Vargo and Lusch 2004). While spawning an important discussion, the value-based selling approach (Terho et al. 2012) and related concepts have so far

neglected to explore in detail what behaviors value-oriented salespeople exactly engage in, and to relate these behaviors to underlying socio-cognitive value perception processes. We have identified a range of these behaviors, which we have broadly classified into aiming to change, strengthen or expand customers' value perceptions. Using the conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism, this paper contributes by analyzing the subtle socio-cognitive and emotional processes that influence an individual's value perceptions and that help create a joint perspective of value in the sales interaction or, as Haas et al. (2012) call it, 'collective meaning'. The article thus supports extant sales research arguing for the crucial role of the salesperson in creating business value by showing the importance that interpersonal strategies play in influencing customers' value perceptions. Our use of the shadowing technique contributes to sales research by addressing the social and interactive nature of selling, an area which was highlighted as being in need for more research (Plouffe, Williams and Wachner 2008). In focusing on this social element of the sales interaction, we demonstrate the dynamic, interactive nature of influence and value creation processes much more clearly than previous sales process models do.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to adapt the research on salespersons' influence tactics to the context of complex solution selling. By drawing our attention to influence tactics salespeople deploy, Plouffe et al. (2014) and McFarland et al. (2006) have made great advances in demonstrating how the use of influence tactics depend on the buyers' and the sellers' dispositions and styles. We add to this that especially in complex sales contexts influence tactics are also always contingent, that is depending on being used flexibly as a sales interaction evolves.

Our empirical work spans across sales interactions with customers of large and of small, family owned firms. In order to create relational value, salespeople's strategies have to be flexibly adapted not just to the buying context of the interaction, their own selling styles and their buyers' orientation, but importantly be flexible enough to adapt tactics *within* each interaction as the situation unfolds. In terms of influence tactics, four of those that emerged in our study have been identified previously in different, less complex selling contexts: information exchange, recommendations, promises and ingratiation. It thus seems that these are indeed sales influence tactics that are potentially applicable to a wide range of different selling situations. We also observed one tactic that social psychologists have previously proposed but that had only implicitly been talked about in the sales context, namely what we call the 'disrupt' tactic. Finally, we add two further new influence categories to the sales research repertoire: dedicate and reassure.

5.3 Managerial implications

While sales organizations typically are aware of the salesperson's role in creating tangible customer value by increasing profitability, especially in B2B companies salespeople's influence on customer value perceptions through socio-cognitive mechanisms is much less understood. Our findings indicate that value-oriented salespeople employ different tactics to influence the customer's cognition and emotions to change, strengthen or expand customers' value perceptions in the solution, the relationship or the salesperson. We find that value-oriented salespeople create tension in the sales encounter by identifying problems that the customer has not been aware of and disrupting the customer's existing thought framework with new insight. They are aware of the goal ambiguities and decision making challenges

that arise in a customer's daily work life and they employ this knowledge to their advantage to establish their own image as expert and the relationship as a partnership.

B2B companies increasingly focus efforts on identifying pockets of monetary value for their customers that can be packaged and communicated by the salesperson in form of value propositions. They neglect the existence of value in the customer's perception that lies in the interpretation of interpersonal interactions and fall into the trap of objectivity that suggests all value to be identified, documented and communicated. The ability to formulate a monetary improvement for the customer is key to what we call disrupting and thus an important tactic to change customers' value perceptions, it is however not the only way to create value for the customer as some of the value selling literature might suggest. The implication for sales organizations that want their customers to perceive value in their offerings and interactions with their salesforce need to also look into the salesperson's activities and tactics used during sales encounters, as well as the factors influencing these, in order to train and coach new and existing sales staff to influence customer's interpretation of value in the sales encounter.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

As with every perspective, the symbolic interactionist approach is limited in both its methodological reach and some of its underlying dominating assumptions. Symbolic interactionism posits that the individual is genuinely active in thinking, defining situations and adapting lines of actions over and over again in each interaction while at the same time being aware of emotional and social processes. It thus places

significant emphasis on individuals engaging in thoughtful relational work. We consider it a suitable perspective for non-standardized B2B selling, as it works best when used to examine close and often extended personal interactions. However, we acknowledge that in sales situation that are more standard or routine, this perspective may not be suitable.

We chose to focus on the salesforce of one firm in order to fully grasp the context of the sales interactions studied and to minimize variability of organizational and external variables. We are aware that this severely limits the study's generalizability but hope, as we will detail in the next Section, that future research can triangulate our findings through the use of different qualitative and quantitative methods. Focus group or interview-based research for instance would be able to ascertain the extent to which salespeople are aware of, consciously deploy and adapt their influence techniques beyond our relatively limited sample of 40 sales interactions. Quantitative, survey-based research on the other hand could help develop scales for the identified influence tactics and link them to sales performance more formally than we were able to do in this study. In this context, it is of interest to note that in our ethnographically inspired, in-depth study of a salesforce of one firm we identified some of the same influence tactics that were also identified by the quantitative, cross-sectional studies of Plouffe et al. (2014) and McFarland et al. (2006). Our research could supplement these studies and contextualize the tactics further.

5.5 Future Research

While not unknown in a sales context, we would urge future research to add the three types of behaviours newly identified in this study (disrupt, reassure, dedicate)

to their lists when researching influence tactics in solution sales and to engage in stringent scale development. Influence tactics have been discussed mostly implicitly in B2B sales and marketing research, even though it is accepted that a salesperson's job revolves around influencing customers. More focus on the minutiae of how influence is best exerted in a longitudinal customer relationship is warranted.

More generally, we would urge future research to quantify and test elements of our framework of the socio-cognitive construction of customer value through influence tactics. We highlighted the emotional and social components of value creation in the sales interaction. Future research should be encouraged to explore in greater detail the links between emotional intelligence or empathy and successful use of contingent influence tactics. Such research would also be valuable to sales managers in complex B2B settings wishing to recruit for or train value-oriented sales personnel. In this context, future research should identify the skills highly successful value-oriented salespeople have, and how these may be replicated in a sales team.

In this paper, we have focused on the individual level of value perceptions and how these are shaped. Value concepts have received a great deal of attention in the B2B literature in the past two decades, and it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the various value concepts across the behavioral, cognitive, tactical, operational, individual, relationship, firm and inter-organizational levels. We would welcome a meta-analysis or similar review of the state of this literature, leading future research to being clear about where their specific contribution lies and how it relates to other value concepts.

6. Conclusions

This paper investigated how salespeople shape customers' value perceptions in the sales interaction through interpersonal influence tactics. By employing shadowing as a methodology that captures the nuances of sales interactions, we have shown that where value is interpretive, idiosyncratic and situational, the salesperson's work in influencing customers' value perceptions plays at cognitive, emotional and social/relational levels simultaneously. Symbolic interactionism provides a frame to focus on activities since emotions, motives, symbols, objects, significant others and past experiences are all seen as embodied in people's activities and interpretations (Charon 2007). By opening up the micro-level of the sales interaction to research insights, this exploratory study has contributed to a burgeoning literature on value creation in sales that arguably has heretofore lacked granularity in describing the activities value-oriented salespeople engage in.

We link these activities with research on influence tactics, which have not previously been studied in complex solution sales. We corroborate Plouffe et al.'s (2014) and McFarland et al.'s (2006) findings that influence tactics in sales are person-dependent and thus far from a 'one size fits all'; we add to their findings that they are also context- and situation-specific. By linking influence tactics and value creating activities to socio-cognitive mechanisms such as encouraging willingness to change, decreasing uncertainty and increasing irreplaceability we have identified higher order value strategies that are relevant beyond our particular empirical context.

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Table 1
Influence tactics in sales (based on Mc Farland et al. 2006)

Influence tactic	Salesperson activity description
Information exchange	Educating buyers about the salesperson's products and services, general business issues, and operating procedures to alter the customer's general perceptions.
Recommendations	Providing specific suggestions and arguments to the buyer for making purchase decisions that convince the buyer of the benefit. Suggesting behaviours that the buyer should follow to accomplish organizational objectives.
Promises	Promising rewards or benefits for (a specific behaviour of) the customer.
Threats	Communicating negative sanctions in case of failure to comply with desired behaviour.
Inspirational appeals	Attaching emotional relevance to a product, independent of the product's performance or functional utility to achieve a positive affective response by specifically appealing to their own values, aspirations, organizational ideals, goals, etc.
Ingratiation	Involves behaviours designed to enhance the salesperson's own personal attractiveness or otherwise improve rapport with the customer (e.g. behaving affably, discuss shared interests and hobbies, and give praise and compliments)

Table 2
Salesperson influence on customer value perceptions

Value strategies	Influence tactics	Activities
Changing customer value perceptions *by reframing the customer situation and problem interpretation*	Exchange information	• Asks open and closed questions to understand the explicit and underlying customer needs • Listens to customer requirements for solution to understand what is important to the customer • Identifies & communicates problems with the customer's existing solution or in the customer's business based on insight shared by customer or own assumptions • Translates the implications of these problems to the customer situation • Seeks customer agreement on these problems • Tells features and benefits of the new solution related to anticipated problems
	Disrupt	• Shows the problems of the current customer situations supported with emotional or rational arguments • Contradicts and creates tension • Creates a solution that is different from the request • Demonstrates a monetary improvement or value of a proposed change
	Recommend	• Proposes an action resolving the previously demonstrated disadvantages of the current situation • Links the recommended action to a future scenario that the customer seems to perceive as improved • Provides a solution creating anticipated customer value
Strengthening customer value perceptions by *confirming and reinforcing the interaction as means for*	Reassure	• Assures the customer in the own ability to solve the own problem • Educate the customer about the reasons for their problem • Shows expertise and authenticity by sharing honest concerns and potential problems with the situation or a solution

customer goal achievement		• Engages customer in brainstorming of pros and cons of different solution possibilities • Confirms and strengthens customer in the jointly found solution • Gives personal advise supporting customer's decision making
	Promise	• Takes actions and supports with promises to deliver in time and quality needed for customer to succeed • Makes deals that decrease risk for the customer and make their decision making easier
Expanding customer value perception by *increasing the salesperson attractiveness as future interaction partner*	Ingratiate	• Does personal favours • Proves to the customer their ability and willingness to earn the next request for help • Establishes routines that make the customer's work life easier (reporting, administration etc.) • Uses opportunities for acts that are likely to 'pay back' • Uses body language and gestures that symbolize and signal the importance of the customer for the salesperson
	Dedicate	• Assures the customer availability and time • Is flexible/available when customer asks for a meeting • Dedicates extra time to the customer to make the customer feel important

Figure 1
Socio-cognitive construction of value