

**PREPARING TO NEGOTIATE:
AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF THE ACTIVITIES
COMPRISING THE PRE-NEGOTIATION PROCESS
IN A BUYER-SELLER INTERACTION**

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A significant body of research has focused on the negotiation process, especially how skilled negotiators gain an advantage in the marketplace. However, the preoccupation with negotiation table exchanges has been at the expense of understanding what negotiators do prior to arriving at the table, which often determines what options they have while actively conversing. While previous research into negotiation antecedents has tended to focus on the demographic characteristics of the negotiator, the focus of this research is on defining the activities that negotiators often conduct in preparation of the negotiation encounter. Comprehending these activities should illuminate priorities, tendencies, and coveted behaviors/actions that people invest in prior to a negotiation encounter. The researchers identify and test a list of 34 pre-negotiation activities in a business negotiation situation, specifically in a buyer-seller encounter. Managerial implications and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Negotiation, defined as a process by which parties attempt to reach an accord that specifies how they will act toward one another (Sawyer and Guetzkow 1965), is a fundamental phenomenon in inter-firm exchange behavior in business markets. In fact, marketing theorist Wroe Alderson (1957, p. 113) referred to negotiation as the “crowning process of business effort.” Given its central role and pragmatic importance in the exchange process, it should come as no surprise that over the years a significant stream of research has focused on the negotiation process. Much of this research has attempted to identify why some negotiators tend to make better deals than others. In general, this research has tended to focus on either the actual negotiation interaction, that is what happens at the negotiation table, or negotiator antecedent variables, such as negotiator age (Rubin and Brown 1975), experience (Phelps and Shanteau 1978), education (Rubin and Brown 1975), gender

(Rolloff and Greenberg 1979), or national origin (Graham 1983).

While much has been learned from negotiation research, it has been suggested that what the negotiator does to prepare for the negotiation interaction may have a significant impact on their success, or failure, in the negotiation interaction (Rognes 1995). In fact, Lewicki, Saunders, and Milton (1997, p. 91) go so far as to suggest that, “other things being equal, the negotiator who plans better does better.” More recently, Peterson and Lucas (2001) proposed a conceptualization of the pre-negotiation process in the sales arena. According to their framework, shown in Table 1, the pre-negotiation process consists of four components or phases. Two of the phases, formulation and strategy development, are directly related to planning activities, the other two phases focus on collecting information that will facilitate the process (intelligence gathering) and practicing/rehearsing the application of the plan in advance of the negotiation encounter (preparation phase). Unfortunately, to this point no empirical research has explored any aspect of this pre-negotiation process.

The purpose of this study is to begin to address this research shortcoming by exploring the activities individuals undertake in preparation for a sales-oriented negotiation situation. In particular, this research will focus on a situation in which the *terms* of an agreement (e.g., pricing, delivering, warranty, support services, etc.) are under negotiation. The objective of the research will be to explore what negotiators “do” prior to the negotiation table in order to obtain the best terms. To that end, we will first identify a comprehensive list of activities that are often used in preparing for a business negotiation encounter. Next, using a graduate student population participating in a simulated sales-oriented negotiation situation, we will confirm that these activities are, in fact, used in the pre-negotiation planning process. The outcome of the research will be a thorough list of pre-negotiation activities for a buyer-seller negotiation context.

TABLE 1
Four-Phase Pre-Negotiation Framework
Suggested by Peterson and Lucas (2001)

Intelligence Gathering	Act of collecting, processing, analyzing, and evaluating available data concerning the other party and relevant environmental factors.
Formulation	Entails developing goals, specific objectives, and setting the parameters for each issue to be negotiated.
Strategy Development	Strategy is a plan that integrates a person’s goals and action sequences into a cohesive whole.
Preparation	Involves rehearsing verbal communication, arranging/creating support materials, and attending to logistical concerns.

**IDENTIFYING
 PRE-NEGOTIATION ACTIVITIES**

Identifying a comprehensive list of activities utilized by individuals as they prepare to negotiate seems to be a natural beginning point toward gaining a better understanding the pre-

negotiation process (Hunt 2002). In his paradigm for developing better constructs Churchill (1979) suggests beginning the construct development process with a thorough review of the existing literature on the subject in question. Following Churchill’s suggestion, the academic negotiation literature was searched for insights into the pre-negotiation process. Due to the limited number of rigorous academic studies in this area, the search was augmented by research published in the trade press and textbooks. This review of the literature resulted in 21 planning activities. Using the Peterson and Lucas (2001) Four-Phase Pre-Negotiation Framework as a classification structure, each of the 21 items fit suitably into the conceptualization through a sorting task involving two independent judges. See Table 2.

After the literature review, additional activities/items were sought to augment the domain specification. To that end, a panel consisting of three senior business people, each with over 20 years of business experience, and two senior marketing faculty members involved in teaching and researching in the negotiation area was convened to review the list of pre-negotiation activities. This panel suggested an additional 12 pre-negotiation activities.

To validate the list of generated items and to estimate the amount of time expected to perform each item, personal interviews were then conducted with a group of sales representatives from five different firms and senior negotiators from a large public accounting firm. These individuals were chosen because they routinely negotiating agreements with clients. The interviews led to a refinement of several items as well as the addition and consolidation of further items. This particular group was selected for the interviews since negotiation is an integral aspect of their position. They were asked whether these activities were: (1) certainly characteristic, (2) somewhat characteristic, or (3) not characteristic of pre-negotiation planning and preparation activities. When asked to suggest additional pre-negotiation activities this group

TABLE 2
Pre-Negotiation Planning Literature Review Items

Information Gathering Activities:

1. Collect primary data (consult with others in your firm, client's firm, 3rd party firms)
2. Collect secondary data (industry, government, trade publications, Internet, annual reports, 10k, etc.)
3. Gather data on market conditions, future trends, and how they may affect each party
4. Review history of the relationship from internal sources/data

Formulation Activities:

5. Set negotiation objectives
6. Define issues to be deliberated
7. Define the bargaining mix (what is on the table and what is not)
8. Set limit levels on issue(s) (optimistic, realistic, pessimistic)
9. Conceive BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement, point where you agree not to do business)
10. Incorporate potential plans of the other party
11. Create a negotiating team assign responsibilities, role, and deadlines)
12. Outline the role you will assume (if part of a team)
13. Consult with others regarding your plan/strategy

Strategy Development Activities:

14. Develop trade-off strategy on the issues (what you will give for what in return)
15. Devise collaborative strategies (cooperative ideas and options)
16. Devise competitive attacking strategies (options to be highly aggressive)
17. Devise competitive defending strategies (options to defend against attacks)
18. Devise concession strategy (slow, but planned concessions to appease client)
19. Develop strategy(ies) that use a 3rd party to influence client actions (friendly/coercive influence asserted from 3rd party)

Preparation Activities

20. Role Play
21. Script opening ceremonies (formal opening statement)

could only suggest one additional activity. Thus, 13 items were added (see Table 3) to the list of 21 activities gleaned from the literature.

All the items were deemed to be either certainly or somewhat characteristic of the pre-negotiation process according to the group of experts, yielding a total of 34 activities. Finally, a pilot test was executed using 47 graduate students in a Southeastern university. The respondents were asked to review the activities and determine if some activities were missing and/or the anticipated times to execute the activities were incorrect. This pre-test supported the initial work and did not change the results; changes were grammatical in nature. The complete list of pre-negotiation items can be found in Table 4.

VERIFYING THE PRE-NEGOTIATION PROCESS ACTIVITIES

The second step in this research utilized a negotiation scenario approach to verify that the 34 activities were, in fact, used in the pre-negotiation process and seeking additional activities that could be added. The negotiation scenario used for this prescribed the general role the respondents were to play leading to a pending negotiation. The scenario was a modified version of Graham's (1984) widely used Bolter simulation. The Bolter simulation (see Appendix A) entails the buying or selling of capital equipment for the purposes of extracting natural gas. There are a range of issues that a negotiator would need to prepare to discuss including purchase price, delivery

TABLE 3
Additional Pre-Negotiation Process Activities Suggested by
Marketing Faculty Members, Senior Marketing Management and Study Respondents

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1. Knowledge of the competitive alternatives the client may be pursuing
 2. Review history of the relationship from internal sources/data
 3. Review the previous strategies used by both you and the client
 4. Knowledge of client's anticipated preparation
 5. Understand the other's decision-making unit (structure and process)
 6. Create an agenda for negotiation
 7. Define your interests
 8. Outline the role you will assume (if part of a team)
 9. Prepare questions from client (questions that are in need of answers)
 10. Prepare for anticipated questions from client (answers to questions or objections)
 11. Prepare a mutual interest business topic (topic both parties find relevant to business concerns)
 12. Prepare visual and other aids (charts, graphs, presentation aids)
 13. Logistical concerns (seating arrangements, food, drink, room availability)

terms, payments terms, and a service agreement. Other researchers have used the Bolter scenario and have found it robust and complex enough to connote a real world experience (Alexander 1988; Alexander, Schul, and Babukus 1991; Westbrook 1997). Given their role as lead negotiator, the respondents were then asked to assume that they had 500 points (each point representing a unit of time to be spent) to distribute across the negotiation phases of this specific scenario. They were asked to divide their points among the three phases: 1) pre-negotiation (generally includes intelligence gathering, formulation, strategy, and preparation activities), 2) negotiation (includes actual face-to-face interaction with the client), and 3) post negotiation (includes implementation and follow-up issues). Based on the amount of points they allotted themselves for the pre-negotiation phase, each person was asked to scrutinize the list of preparation activities identified in the first phase of this research, and circle the ones they would undertake in order to prepare for their upcoming negotiation.

The list of activities given the respondents was categorized into four segments, intelligence gathering, formulation, strategy, and preparation. Each activity listed was associated with a point value. In order to gain this information or level of preparation, they had to spend the necessary points to obtain it, (i.e.,

“collecting primary data” costs 15 points). They were allowed to invest their points in whatever categories they wished. The activities within each category were in random order, thus no hierarchy was implied. If they wished to add an item to the list they could do so, and they could assign their own point value to it.

The subjects participating in this phase of the study were 178 graduate students at a major Southeastern university. The use of graduate students is often deemed acceptable in many types of research (Kardes 1996). A total of 172 usable responses were received, yielding a 97 percent response rate. The respondents tended to be male (64 percent), less than 34 years of age (82 percent), with an average of five-six years work experience, with 96.5 percent currently employed while pursuing their degree.

Table 5 presents the ranking of pre-negotiation process activities this sample indicated it would complete. A review of Table 5 indicates that all 34 activities were used by 14 percent to 84 percent of the respondents, offering support that these activities are, in fact, used by business people as they prepare for negotiation situations. Respondents were also given the option of adding additional activities in each category. Only three respondents added a total of four activities, which were clearly simple rewording of activities already on the list. These results suggest that the list of activities

TABLE 4
Pre-Negotiation Planning Activities

Information Gathering Activities:

1. Collect primary data (consult with others in your firm, client's firm, 3rd party firms)
2. Collect secondary data (industry, government, trade publications, Internet, annual reports, 10k, etc.)
3. Gather data on market conditions, future trends, and how they may affect each party
4. Understand other party (general profile, personality profiles, and communication patterns of others involved)
5. Knowledge of the competitive alternatives the client may be pursuing
6. Review history of the relationship from internal sources/data
7. Review the previous strategies used by both you and the client
8. Knowledge of client's anticipated preparation
9. Understand the other's decision-making unit (structure and process)

Formulation Activities:

1. Set negotiation objectives
2. Define your interests
3. Define issues to be deliberated
4. Define the bargaining mix (what is on the table and what is not)
5. Set limit levels on issue(s) (optimistic, realistic, pessimistic)
6. Conceive BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement, point where you agree not to do business)
7. Create an agenda for negotiation
8. Incorporate potential plans of the other party
9. Create a negotiating team assign responsibilities, role, and deadlines)
10. Outline the role you will assume (if part of a team)
11. Consult with others regarding your plan/strategy

Strategy Development Activities:

1. Develop team strategy (who will speak, who will introduce demands, concessions, solutions)
2. Develop trade-off strategy on the issues (what you will give for what in return)
3. Devise collaborative strategies (cooperative ideas and options)
4. Devise competitive attacking strategies (options to be highly aggressive)
5. Devise competitive defending strategies (options to defend against attacks)
6. Devise concession strategy (slow, but planned concessions to appease client)
7. Develop strategy(ies) that use a 3rd party to influence client actions (friendly/coercive influence asserted from 3rd party)

Preparation Activities:

1. Role Play
2. Script opening ceremonies (formal opening statement)
3. Prepare questions from client (questions that are in need of answers)
4. Prepare for anticipated questions from client (answers to questions or objections)
5. Prepare a mutual interest business topic (topic both parties find relevant to business concerns)
6. Prepare visual and other aids (charts, graphs, presentation aids)
7. Logistical concerns (seating arrangements, food, drink, room availability)

TABLE 5
Response Frequencies of Pre-Negotiation Process Activities

<u>Negotiation Activity</u>	<u>Percentage Selecting</u>
<u>Intelligence Gathering</u>	
1. Collect Primary Data	84.4%
2. Obtain Client Preparation info	70.5%
3. Collect Secondary Data	62.4%
4. Review Previous Strategies	53.8%
5. Review History of the Relationship	45.1%
6. Understand other side's decision unit	40.5%
7. Obtain Competitive Alternatives	37.6%
8. Gather Data on Market Conditions	30.1%
9. Understand Other Party	29.5%
<u>Formulation</u>	
1. Incorporate action plans of other	65.3%
2. Outline your personal role	61.8%
3. Define your interests	54.3%
4. Contrive BATNA	54.3%
5. Define the bargaining mix	47.4%
6. Consult with others on the plan	45.1%
7. Define issues to be deliberated	42.8%
8. Set limit levels on the issue	39.9%
9. Create agenda for negotiation	35.3%
10. Create negotiating team	30.1%
11. Set Negotiation Objectives	23.7%
<u>Strategy</u>	
1. Develop 3 rd party strategies	80.9%
2. Devise Competitive attack strategies	64.2%
3. Devise Competitive defend strategies	50.9%
4. Devise Concession strategies	46.2%
5. Develop trade-off strategy	38.7%
6. Devise Collaborative strategies	31.2%
7. Develop team strategy	20.5%
<u>Preparation</u>	
1. Script opening ceremonies	68.2%
2. Perform role-plays	64.7%
3. Address logistical concerns	59.3%
4. Prepare mutual interest topic	55.5%
5. Prepare visual and other aids	27.2%
6. Prepare questions for client	23.7%
7. Prepare for anticipated questions from client	14.5%

identified in this research compose a comprehensive list of pre-negotiation activities.

SUMMATION AND IMPLICATIONS

It has been suggested that entering the negotiation encounter unprepared provides the opposition a negotiation edge (Smith 2007). However, little research has focused on pre-negotiation preparation activities. This study has contributed by beginning the process of exploring the activities negotiators perform when preparing for a negotiation encounter within a business-to-business sales negotiation. Using earlier works by academics and in the trade press, a list of activities that negotiators undertake prior to a negotiation session was developed. This list of pre-negotiation activities was expanded with suggestions from business negotiators, marketing faculty members, and study respondents. The initial testing and validation of the framework offered support for the 34 items generated via pre-testing and then tested on a sample of 172 respondents. The results of this initial study suggested that the 34 items generated appear inclusive.

The results of this study offer several managerial implications. For example, it has been suggested that negotiation proficiency can become a corporate competency (Ertel 1999; 2004). To that end, Ertel suggests the development of a companywide infrastructure designed to facilitate systematic improvement in negotiation proficiency. As part of that infrastructure, the comprehensive list of pre-negotiation activities identified in this research should prove useful in several areas.

First, the list of pre-negotiation activities identified in this research can be useful in hiring job candidates that possess negotiation skills. One approach would be to observe the candidate's use of the pre-negotiation planning activities. For example, observing the responses to interviewer questions such as, "Why would you like to work for our company?" and, "What income offer are you expecting or needing to accept this position?" offer insights into the degree of pre-negotiation effort and ability.

Another approach would be to ask the job candidate to role-play through a business negotiation scenario, similar to the format presented in this research, observing the candidates use, or lack of use, of each of the pre-negotiation activities.

The pre-negotiation activities identified in this research should also prove useful in developing negotiation-training programs. The first step in the training program would be evaluating the proficiency of the current employee base on each of these activities. The second step would be developing a training program designed to improve the employee base in the pre-negotiation planning activities that need improvement. As a component of on-going training and improvement efforts, the list of pre-negotiation activities can be used as a guide for post-negotiation analysis.

The list of pre-negotiation activities developed in this research should also prove helpful to management as the list highlights the steps that should be covered in the pre-negotiation planning process. Certainly the time constraints that may be inherent in many business negotiation situations may require negotiators to limit, or even omit, certain planning activities. In fact, the results of this study suggest that several of the activities would be a low priority for pre-negotiation planning for many of the respondents in the sample. For example, in this study only 14.5 percent indicated that they would include preparing for anticipated questions in their pre-negotiation planning activities. Additionally, other items that would intuitively seem important pre-negotiation activities but were used sparingly included developing a team strategy (20 percent), and setting negotiation objectives (23 percent). These results suggest that management should reinforce the value of each of the pre-negotiation activities and the need to include as many of the activities as possible given the constraints of the negotiation situation. For example, if preparing for anticipated questions is deemed to be an important pre-negotiation activity the training program should stress its inclusion.

FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

The newly developed framework and activities of the pre-negotiation phase captures the beginning portion of the negotiation process, but this study is very embryonic. Being one of the first empirical investigations in this domain, future studies should test and re-test these findings, and further explicate the activities undertaken prior to a negotiation encounter. While the list of pre-negotiation activities appears robust, confirmation and augmentation of the 34 activities is crucial to domain specification. Another aspect of the present study that merits further research is the extension of the current conceptualization to other research settings. Do the pre-negotiation activities grow or contract if the ensuing encounter promises to be highly competitive or collaborative? Also, does the international generalizability of this research hold? Do Asians, Europeans, or Arabs have a different set of activities they perform? While acknowledging the infancy of this investigation, it makes an important initial contribution to a newly defined domain of negotiation research. Obviously, a key eventual outcome would be to understand associations between planning inputs and negotiated outcomes, especially if a stepwise regression would help define a hierarchical relationship between pre-negotiation activities. In short, what are the most vital (and perhaps parsimonious) pre-negotiation activities to undertake to improve negotiated outcomes?

Scaling work needs to be undertaken. The list of pre-negotiation activities developed in this research should now be translated into scales that can measure the various facets of those activities. Among other things, understanding the importance of each activity would be beneficial. We would also like to ascertain in some way, the quality of these activities as they are undertaken, and link quality to performance in the negotiation process with further links to outcomes. While performing or not performing a pre-negotiation activity might be important to understanding how it links to performance of

negotiation behaviors, in all likelihood it will be the performance of those pre-negotiation behaviors that is most predictive. For example, as previously mentioned only 14 percent of the respondents included “preparing for objections” as a pre-negotiation activity. If constraints require the omission of certain pre-negotiation items, it would certainly be helpful to understand the relative importance of each item – thereby omitting those items that are deemed less important.

In closing, this research has begun the process of exploring the activities that business negotiators utilize in anticipation of a negotiation encounter. Of course, care must be taken in generalizing from this exploratory study. While research limitations exist, interested stakeholders now have a list of planning activities that comprise the pre-negotiation process. It is our hope that this list of pre-negotiation activities will focus practitioner attention on these important planning activities and stimulates other researchers to direct their attention on this broadened conceptualization of the antecedents of the negotiation encounter.

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APPENDIX A The Bolter Scenario

You are the lead sales representative in a contract negotiation between two firms over the sale of a complex compressor system used in the offshore production of natural gas. Stated simply, the compressor forces the natural gas from the seabed into a system that allows for its capture. The two involved firms are: 1) Bolter Turbines Inc.—a manufacturer of natural gas production equipment (with whom you are a salesperson), and 2) Maverick Natural Gas Inc.—a producer of natural gas with production operations concentrated in the Gulf of Mexico. This contract negotiation is based on the potential purchase by Maverick of one compressor *system*, but there is always a desire of selling additional units.

Maverick has been a customer for several years and knows you and your company through previous work you have performed for them. This compressor *system* would represent a lucrative increase in business from your client, and would be one of the first sales for a new and improved compressor system. The sales process has proceeded relatively smoothly, a few bumps here and there, but now the big decisions must be made during the negotiation.

Over the past few months, you (the Bolter sales representative) have been actively involved in preliminary sales negotiations with the Maverick purchasing agent and other Maverick staff members over the purchase of the *system*. This product is a specialized compressor system recently developed by your firm, and is rated as the best in the market at extracting natural gas. You have offered Maverick a general price range for the *system* (\$2-3 million), but have not talked any specifics yet.

Your role in the negotiation will be to negotiate with the other party to reach a decision on a contract for the *system*, including finalizing the price on the compressor, the price of the service contract and the delivery date. Again, your task is to complete the negotiations and get a signed agreement for the 1) compressor system, 2) service contract and 3) delivery date of the equipment.

Those receiving the **Completive** stimuli were given additional information; emphasis original.

Important Information:

It is your professional feeling, and other sources have confirmed it, that the Maverick negotiators are only concerned with making as much money from this deal as possible. They are not out to hurt you necessarily, but they do not feel the need to help you either. You anticipate Maverick being highly competitive with you. In fact, they will be as competitive as it takes so they can reach their objectives on every issue. You must take care of yourself if you intend to reach your goals and corporate objectives.

Those receiving the **Collaborative** stimuli were given additional information; emphasis original.

Important Information:

It is your professional feeling, and other sources have confirmed it, that the Maverick negotiators will tend to be *highly* collaborative

with you. They have a reputation for working well together with those who cooperate with them. They think your *system* can be a good business arrangement for both parties. Maverick still wants to win as much as they can, but they also want you to win as well. While you might not agree on everything, you have reason to believe that everyone has the best intentions and will work together to find an agreeable solution.