

REDEFINING THE SALES CALL: THE BUYER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Recent technological advances, such as the Internet, social media, and related technologies, are revolutionizing the field of sales. Sales calls are the fundamental means of sales communication between salespeople and buyers. Traditionally, sellers used face-to-face sales calls as the primary form of contact with buyers. However, salespeople have routinely adapted innovations in technology to the sales process, such as the mobile and landline telephones, social media, voice mail, and postal services, as well as printed and online materials. As technology continues to offer enhancements to sales calls, sellers are also incorporating new tools to communicate with buyers. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the buyer's expectation of the seller's use of various forms of sales calls in relation to the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson. The phase of the relationship between the buyer and the seller is expected to moderate the strength of the relationship between the form of sales call and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

Keywords: Sales Calls, Face-to-face, Technology, Social Media, Buyer's Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The field of sales is currently undergoing such a radical change that researchers are calling it a "revolution in sales" (Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, & Lee, 2012). This revolution is due to the technological advances dramatically affecting sales communications with buyers via the Internet, social media, virtual meeting technologies, and electronic Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems (Rapp, Agnihotri, & Forbes, 2008; Robinson, Marshall, & Stamps, 2005). Throughout history, salespeople have recognized the advantages of incorporating technological advances into their sales communication activities with buyers. For example, the telephone and postal services changed how salespeople were able to communicate with customers over a century ago, as have more recent technological developments. Given the impact of these historical changes in communication tools, sellers often are considered "early adopters" of such improvements (Christ & Anderson, 2011; Widmier, Jackson, & McCabe, 2002).

Sellers have traditionally approached buyers by means of face-to-face sales calls and researchers have devoted attention to better understanding their use (e.g., Hamwi, Rutherford, Barksdale, & Johnson, 2013; Weitz, Castleberry, & Tanner, 2007). Traditionally, the focus for sellers was building strong personal relationships with buyers using face-to-face interactions, frequently referred to as "high touch" techniques. Conversely, the use of firm-provided technologies that assist or enable the performance of sales tasks is commonly referred to as "high tech" (Hunter & Perreault, 2006). Given the complexity of selling today, however, salespeople incorporate many different strategies to communicate with buyers, trying to achieve a delicate balance between "high touch" and "high tech" (Ferrell, Gonzalez-Padron, & Ferrell, 2010, p. 157). Buyers ultimately make purchasing decisions based on their evaluation of the salesperson's actions (e.g., sales calls) (Dixon, Spiro, & Jamil, 2001). It is critical, therefore, to understand how the seller's use of traditional face-to-face sales calls and historical sales tools, as well as more recent technologically enhanced sales tools, impact the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson.

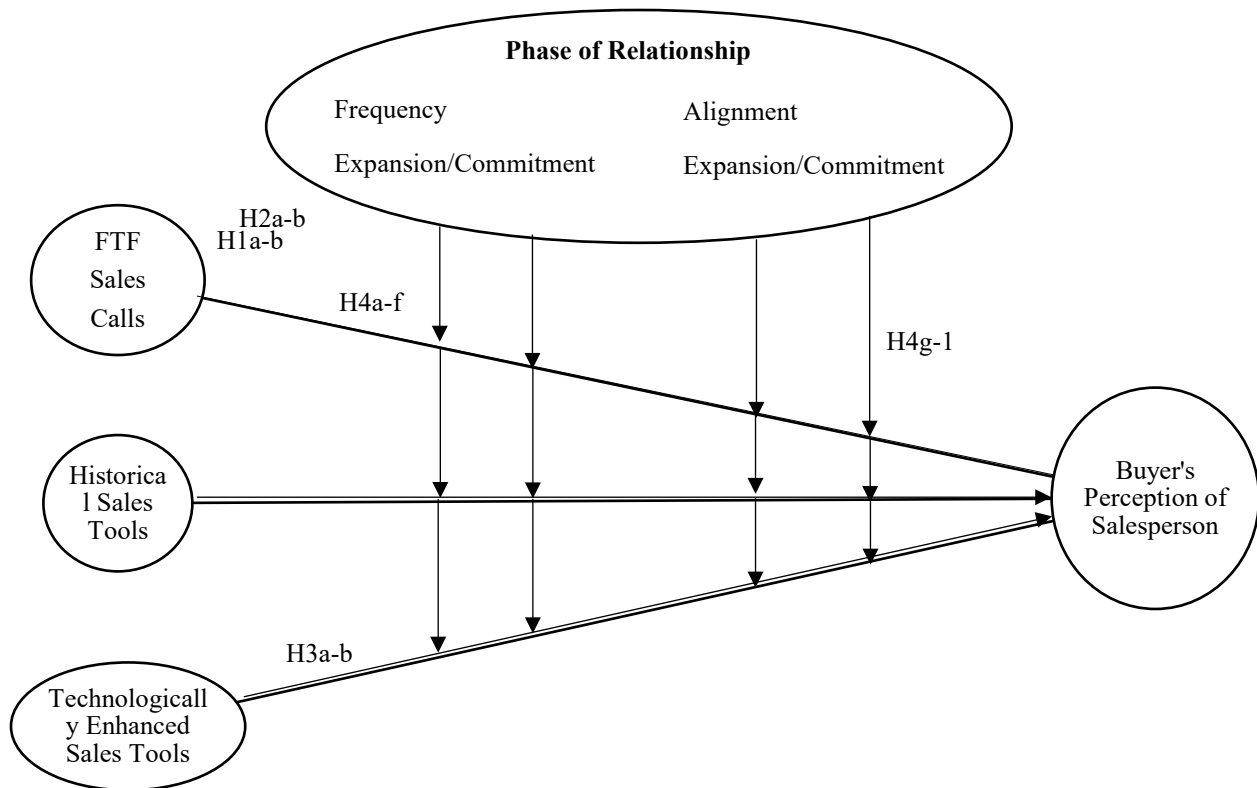
Academic literature provides guidance for using face-to-face sales calls, historical sales tools, and technologically enhanced sales tools. But these three streams have been emerging in divergent studies and failing to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these tools interact with each other. For example, Hamwi, et al. (2013) focused on the frequency of face-to-face sales calls by examining the ideal versus actual number of sales calls using disconfirmation theory as the theoretical foundation. The findings revealed buyers evaluated salespeople more positively when the number of sales calls met the buyers' expectations. The study did not look at other touch points between buyers and sellers, however, such as historical sales communication tools and technologically enhanced sales tools. Similarly, Christ and Anderson (2011) took a historical look at how sellers have used sales communication tools

over the years, but did not consider modern technological enhancements. Finally, Marshall, et al. (2012) acknowledged the impact of modern technologies on the sales process, but did not include face-to-face sales calls or historical sales tools. Recent technological advances have contributed many different communication tools to the buying and selling process. To provide the comprehensive understanding needed, it is therefore important to examine the buyers' perceptions of the seller based on the use of face-to-face sales calls, historical sales tools, and modern technologically enhanced sales tools.

The purpose of this study is to examine the buyer's expectations of the seller's use of different forms of sales calls and tools in relation to the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson. By gaining the buyer's perspective of the use of face-to-face sales calls, historical sales tools, and modern technologically enhanced sales tools, salespeople can make adjustments in their sales strategies and tactics to more effectively meet buyer's expectations (Boujena, Johnston, & Merunka, 2009). Building on this foundation, key factors in the relationship between the buyer and seller should also be considered (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). This is important because buyers may evaluate salespeople differently depending on the stage of the buyer/seller relationship. For example, during the exploration stage of the buyer/seller relationship, the parties are assessing the trustworthiness and dependability of the other party to determine whether continuing the relationship would be mutually beneficial. Therefore, more intense interaction may be needed during this stage. In the later stages of the relationship, such as expansion and commitment, less intense interaction is more effective, since the value of the relationship has been established (Dwyer, et al, 1987).

The model below depicts the proposed relationships among the constructs. The buyer's evaluation of the seller will be influenced by the form of sales call the seller uses. The model also displays the potential moderating effect of the phase of the buyer/seller relationship on the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson.

Figure 1. The Buyer's Perspective Model.



THEORY OVERVIEW

To align the current study with previous research on buyers' perceptions of salespersons' performance, the proposed study will apply disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1977, 1980; Hamwi, et al., 2013). Disconfirmation theory establishes the process by which humans form expectations of outcomes prior to experiencing the product or service. Following the experience of the product or service, comparisons are made between the expectations formed at the outset and the actuality of the result of the experience. Three outcomes can occur from this comparison: confirmation, positive disconfirmation and negative disconfirmation. When expectations established prior to the experience are met, confirmation is the result. When there is a difference between expectations and the seller exceeds the buyer's expectations, positive disconfirmation results. Failure to meet the expectations results in negative disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980). Buyers have an expectation about the form of sales calls a seller will use. If this expectation is reached by the seller, the buyer will experience confirmation of their expectations, leading to a positive evaluation of the salesperson. If the seller's communication exceeds the expectation, the result will be positive disconfirmation, leading to a positive evaluation of the seller. If the seller's communication does not meet the expectations of the buyer, then the buyer will experience negative disconfirmation, which will lead to a negative evaluation of the salesperson (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988).

BACKGROUND

Buyer's Evaluation Defined

Previous research on buyers' evaluations of sellers indicates negative evaluations result in diminished sales outcomes (Spiro, Perreault, & Reynolds, 1977). In contrast, positive evaluations by buyers often result in an immediate increase in sales, and also impact buying intentions for the future (Doney & Cannon, 1997). Buyers typically rely on salespeople as the primary link between their firm and the seller's firm, so the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson is a direct reflection on the evaluation of the firm (Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Johnson, Barksdale, & Boles, 2001; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999; Anaza & Rutherford, 2011; Palmatier, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 2007). It is critical, therefore, for sellers to adapt their sales call strategy to positively influence buyers' perceptions.

Previous research has defined sales success using several indicators, such as sales volume, closing rates, revenue, market share, sales effectiveness, or profit margin (Churchill et al., 1985; Singh & Koshy, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2012). For the sake of simplicity, this research defines successful sales calls as ones that result in closure of the sale (Dixon, et al., 2001). Sellers can adapt their sales call strategy more effectively when they are aware of the buyer's expectations of the form of sales call they prefer, which in turn will increase the likelihood of positively meeting or exceeding expectations (Stafford & Stafford, 2003, p. 40). Prior research has investigated the buyers' expectations of salespeople and indicates several common expectations that buyers have regarding interactions with sellers, ranging from their product expertise to their compatibility (Peterson & Lucas, 2001). Therefore, to positively influence buyers' evaluations of the salesperson, sellers must meet or exceed buyers' expectations regarding the form of sales calls used (Anders, Coleman & Castleberry, 2020; Boujena, Johnston, & Merunka, 2009).

Previous research indicates not closing the sale would be considered a sales failure (Dixon, et al., 2001, p. 64). The buyer's negative perceptions of the salesperson, therefore, have a direct impact on the company's bottom line. The seller's ability to appropriately adapt the form of sales call used to meet the buyer's expectations will enhance the buyer's evaluation (Roman & Iacobucci, 2010; Franke & Park, 2006). If the seller fails to meet the buyer's expectation regarding the form of sales calls used, then the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson will become more negative.

In line with disconfirmation theory, the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson also incorporate the buyer's expectations of the form of sales call the seller will use to communicate with them. Buyers develop expectations of how many times a salesperson should call on them within a certain time period using different forms of sales calls. Buyers also establish preferences about the ideal number of different types of sales calls the seller should use (Tosi, 1966). Tosi (1966) found when sellers matched the buyers' expectations regarding the ideal number of sales calls during a particular period of time, the relationship between the buyer and the seller was strengthened. Boujena, Johnston, and Merunka (2009) also identified interaction frequency as one of the dimensions across which buyers' perceived value from sellers. Therefore, when salespeople are able to align their number of sales calls to match the buyer's expectations, buyers will evaluate sellers more positively (Tosi, 1966; Hamwi, et al., 2013).

Face-to-face Sales Calls Defined

Face-to-face meetings are interpersonal interactions between individuals who are "collocated" or in the same place (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004). Consistent with previous research, face-to-face sales calls are defined as meetings between buyers and sellers who are together in the same space engaging in interpersonal

interaction. Sellers using face-to-face sales calls approach potential buyers in person to represent their product or service line using what researchers have suggested is the richest medium for buyer/seller communications (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Previous researchers have shown face-to-face sales calls as the strongest and deepest form of communication between buyers and sellers (Weitz, et al., 2007; Spiro & Weitz, 1990).

Historical Sales Tools Defined

Christ and Anderson (2011) traced the historical development of the impact of technology on the sales process. The authors found that as communication devices like the telephone and the U.S. Postal Service evolved, buyers and sellers altered the way they interacted with each other in response (Christ & Anderson, 2011, p. 180). Instead of relying solely on face-to-face interactions, business letters, sales collateral, and printed product brochures could be mailed ahead of a sales appointment to influence the buyer's evaluation of the seller before the initial meeting. Although adopting technological improvements can be challenging at first (Rapp, et al., 2008; Hunter & Perreault, 2007), firms continue to appreciate the value of utilizing these tools knowing that the investment will benefit the sales force's productivity, while increasing profitable buyer-seller relationships (Hollenbeck, Zinkhan, French, & Song, 2009). Building on previous research, therefore, historical sales tools are defined as sales communication tools salespeople employ to interact with potential buyers, including telephone, postal services, or printed materials.

Technologically Enhanced Sales Tools Defined

These tools can be defined as ones that include the use of modern technologies, including the Internet, social media, and virtual communities. Previous research indicates that salespeople are incorporating many technological enhancements to their sales calls and experiencing improved performance as a result (Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012). Although implementation of sales force technology enhancements to the sales process can be met by initial resistance by sellers, firms continue to utilize technological enhancements to sales calls to improve the buyer's evaluation of salespeople (Rapp, et al., 2008).

Direct Hypothesis Development

Linking Face-to-face Sales Calls to the Buyer's Evaluation of the Salesperson

Sellers, when using face-to-face sales calls to interact with potential buyers, may positively impact the buyer's evaluation. Recent research has shown buyers may prefer different methods of communication for very specific types of sales interactions, such as initial or cold calls (Anders, Coleman, & Castleberry, 2020); however, in general, buyers still prefer face-to-face sales calls over alternative methods of communication, such as historical sales tools or technologically enhanced sales tools (Cano, Boles, & Bean, 2005). Buyers who are in the same physical location as the seller and interact personally with them have the opportunity to assess the salesperson based on the interchange between the two, thereby influencing the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson (Kirkman, et al., 2004).

Buyers in the same physical location as the seller, and who regularly interact personally with them, can assess the salesperson based on the interchange between the two, thereby influencing the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson (Kirkman, et al., 2004). According to disconfirmation theory, buyers establish expectations about the form of sales calls sellers will use. Sellers who meet or exceed buyers' expectations regarding the number of times (frequency) that sellers use face-to-face sales calls will positively influence the buyer's perceptions. Also, by aligning the use of face-to-face sales calls to match the ideal expectation established by the buyer, the buyer's perceptions of the seller will be positively influenced, as well. Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H1a: Seller's frequency of face-to-face sales calls will be positively related to the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H1b: Alignment of face-to-face sales calls will be positively related to the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

Linking Historical Sales Tools to the Buyer's Perceptions of the Salesperson

According to Kowalkowski and Brehmer (2008), using and adapting technology is an important driver for changes in buyer/seller exchanges. Throughout history, sellers have used telephone communications, postal services, and printed material as sales tools, and these tools have been linked to positive buyer perceptions of sellers when used to contact buyers for appointments or follow up on account services (Cano, et al., 2005). As historical tools improved over the course of history, sellers continuously utilized these tools to influence the buyers' perceptions (Christ & Anderson, 2011).

Buyers set expectations of how often sellers should use historical sales tools. Theoretically, if the seller meets the buyer's expectation of the number of times the seller uses historical sales tools, then the buyer's perceptions will be more positive. Likewise, when the seller's actual number agrees with the buyer's ideal expected number, positive

perceptions of the seller would be likely. Therefore, the use of historical sales tools will influence the buyer's perceptions of salespeople and the following is hypothesized:

H2a: Seller's frequency of historical sales tools will be positively related to the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H2b: Alignment of historical sales tools will be positively related to the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

Linking Technologically Enhanced Sales Calls to the Buyer's Perception of the Salesperson

Strategic use of the Internet, social media, and related technologies by sellers can enhance buyers' perceptions of salespeople because of the unique, interactive features of the applications (Rapp & Panagopoulos, 2012; Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012; Rodriquez, et al., 2012). Sellers can disseminate pertinent information quickly and effectively to millions of potential buyers at a time, while dissatisfied buyers can also instantly influence millions of prospective buyers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Sellers who modify or adapt their selling behavior based on the buyer's needs will positively impact buyers' perceptions of the salesperson (Weitz, Sujana, & Sujana, 1986).

Based on disconfirmation theory, buyers may expect sellers to use technologically enhanced sales tools. In response to buyer's expectations, sellers will continue to evolve using adaptive selling techniques to improve buyer's perceptions of the seller (Marshall, Moncrief, & Lassk, 1999). Boujena, et al. (2009) examined the buyer's perceived benefits of sales force automation systems by their sellers and the results indicated that buyers do perceive benefits (p. 137). However, as noted by Goodhue and Thompson (1995), "the technology must be utilized, and the technology must be a good fit with the tasks it supports" (p. 213). Sellers must choose tools that fit correctly and use them correctly to positively influence the buyer's perception (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Therefore, according to disconfirmation theory, sellers using technologically enhanced sales calls who meet buyers' expectations of the frequency of the use of such calls will receive more positive evaluations from the buyer. Buyers' evaluations are expected to be more positive if sellers also align their actual frequency of use of technologically enhanced sales calls with the ideal number of times expected by the buyer (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H3a: Seller's frequency of technologically enhanced sales calls will be positively related to the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H3b: Alignment of technologically enhanced sales tools will be positively related to the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

MODERATOR: THE PHASE OF RELATIONSHIP

Relationship Development Overview

Dwyer, et al. (1987) compared buyer and seller relationships to those within a traditional marriage arrangement, noting five distinct stages or phases: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution (p. 15). During the awareness phase, buyers and sellers attempt to increase their attractiveness to each other without a significant amount of relational contact. Similarly, in the dissolution stage, one or both of the parties will initiate disengagement, resulting in transactional activities rather than relational. Therefore, the current study will focus on the exploration, expansion, and commitment phases, since these represent more significant relational activity between buyers and sellers.

The exploration phase is a "search and trial" phase in which both buyers and sellers recognize a mutually beneficial reward-cost outcome with a potential exchange partner (Jap & Ganesan, 2000, p. 231). The two parties begin to negotiate the terms of the relationship by communicating and bargaining until they develop dependable norms or standards of conduct with each other. This leads to the expansion phase in which there is increasing interdependence of the two parties and a continual increase in benefits they receive from each other (Frazier, 1983). The commitment phase consists of a pledge between the two parties to continue the relationship. At this phase, buyers and sellers have established an enduring arrangement based on consistent performance during the previous relationship phases (Dwyer, et al., 1987).

Relationship Development Phase as a Moderator

Based on disconfirmation theory, for sellers to effectively meet the expectations of buyers, it is important for sellers to recognize that the expectations of buyers will change as their relationship progresses through the phases. Periodically, sellers need to readdress and gain insight into what the buyers' expectations are and update their approach in order to appropriately adapt (Anderson & Narus, 1990). For example, Selnes (1998) found that the higher the rate of constructive communication regarding sales calls, the higher the level of buyer satisfaction.

Based on the phase of the relationship, the buyer may prefer different forms of sales calls. For example, during the exploration phase, buyers may prefer sellers to use more face-to-face sales calls, while during the commitment phase buyers may prefer more technologically enhanced sales tools. As the two parties are exploring the potential of long-term relational benefits in the earlier stage, more intense personal communications may be effective for the two parties to get to know each other. During the commitment stage, however, communications preferences typically have been established, so using more technologically enhanced tools can suffice instead (Dwyer, et al., 1987). The phase of the relationship may strengthen the relationship between the form of sales calls used by the seller and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson (Jap & Ganesan, 2000). For the analysis, the exploration phase is considered the reference group because exploration and expansion are more similar than expansion and commitment phases. In order to extract the most variance, only the expansion and commitment phases are included in the analysis. The following moderated relationships are hypothesized:

H4a: The expansion phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between frequency of face-to-face sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4b: The commitment phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between frequency of face-to-face sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4c: The expansion phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between frequency of historical sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4d: The commitment phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between frequency of historical sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4e: The expansion phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between frequency of technologically enhanced sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4f: The commitment phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between frequency of technologically enhanced sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4g: The expansion phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between alignment of face-to-face sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4h: The commitment phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between alignment of face-to-face sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4i: The expansion phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between alignment of historical sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4j: The commitment phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between alignment of historical sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4k: The expansion phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between alignment of technologically enhanced sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

H4l: The commitment phase of the relationship will impact the strength of the relationship between alignment of technologically enhanced sales calls and the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of business-to-business buyers needed for the study was obtained by using an established online access panel (Qualtrics). Respondents were screened for participation based on the requirements of the study: 1) respondents must buy products or services, and 2) have face-to-face contact with sellers. Previous survey research confirms the benefits of using online access panels, noting the advantages as prescreening of respondents, cost efficiency, and timeliness of responses (Hartmann, Rutherford, Feinberg, & Anderson, 2014). Organizational buyers from a wide range of firms were included in the sample. Panel data usage is suggested for use with cross-sectional studies and longitudinal studies (Zikmund & Babin, 2010; Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010).

The size of the sample is important to ensure generalizability. Previous researchers examining buyers' evaluations of sellers have used a wide range of sample sizes, including small samples around 70 respondents (Stafford & Stafford, 2003) to larger samples over 200 respondents (Hansen & Riggle, 2008). The general rule of thumb is a minimum 5 observations per parameter while 15 to 20 observations are more desirable (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010, p.175). Based on this guideline, an appropriate sample size would be between 90 and 180 to obtain 5 to 15 observations per item. Therefore, data from 150 buyers from various industries were purchased.

A total of 1,819 emails were initially sent to respondents. Responses received after the deadline that did not meet the basic qualifications to take the survey and those with missing data were removed. This resulted in 165 total useable responses with a response rate of 16.3%.

The buyers' responses were further examined for: 1) the amount of annual purchases they made; 2) job titles that

represented business-to-business buyers; and 3) data quality and completion. Respondents were removed if they purchased less than \$1,000 per month (12). An unrelated item was added to the Likert scale for the dependent variable instructing respondents to answer “strongly disagree.” If they failed to do so, they were removed (3). Responses that were missing data or were nonsensical were removed, as were outliers that contained extreme responses or straight-lined answers. The result was 132 complete and qualified questionnaires for a usable response rate of 13.1%.

When the moderating variables were evaluated, an additional 28 respondents were removed from the final sample because the respondents in the attraction and dissolution phases were not examined in the final regression analyses. This reduced the number of respondents to 104 for a final response rate of 10.3%. According to Hair, et al. (2010), the sample size of 104 meets the recommended guidelines.

The average age of the respondents was 46, with males accounting for 64% of the sample. The median annual salary was \$72,000, while the median annual purchasing volume was \$3,000,000. The majority of the respondents conducted purchasing duties domestically (54%), while 44% purchased both domestically and internationally. Only 2% indicated they only performed their purchasing duties internationally. The characteristics of the respondents are summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1: Respondent Profile

Male	64%
Female	36%
Age (Average)	46 years old
Annual Compensation (Median)	\$72,000
Annual Purchasing Volume (Median)	\$3,000,000
Domestic Scope	54%
Domestic and International Scope	44%
International Only	2%

Measures

Prior to developing the survey, a small-scale qualitative study was conducted to generate an exhaustive list of sales call tools buyers had used in the last four-week period. Then they were asked to assign the different types of sales calls to the three categories: face-to-face, historical, and technologically enhanced. The results were used to inform the development of the final survey instrument. The definitions were based on these results.

Survey items from existing scales were adapted to measure the constructs in this study. Previous researchers have measured both the frequencies of sales calls, as well as the alignment of the actual number versus the ideal number expected by buyers (Hamwi, et al., 2013). To measure frequency, respondents were asked how many times the seller used each type of sales call tool. To measure alignment, they were asked how many times they would have preferred the seller to use each type of sales call. Respondents entered a numerical value for the frequency measure and the alignment measure.

The buyer’s evaluation of the seller was measured by adapting items from the Brown (1995) study. This study used a 7-point semantic differential scale to assess the buyer’s evaluation of the seller. Respondents were asked to evaluate the seller on each of the following five dimensions: bad/good; ineffective/effective; not useful/useful; unlikeable/likeable; unhelpful/ helpful. The anchors were strongly disagree/strongly agree.

The phase of the relationship between the buyer and the seller was expected to moderate the relationship between the type of sales call the seller used and the buyer’s evaluation of the seller. To measure the moderator variables, respondents were asked two questions. First, they were asked to briefly describe their relationship with the seller. Then they were asked to self-identify the phase they thought best represented the current relationship with a seller by choosing one of five categories: attraction, exploration, expansion, commitment, or dissolution (Dwyer, et al., 1987) (See Appendix A for the Buyer’s Survey).

Analytical Approach

Given the single dependent variable and three independent variables, multiple regression was used to analyze the data (Hair, et al., 2010). To assess the moderation effect of the phase of the relationship variable, regression with moderation was also used. The standard approach involves a three-step process beginning with initial analysis of only the independent variables and the dependent variable (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010). This was followed by additional analysis including the moderator variable. Finally, the interaction term was calculated and included. If the R² change was statistically significant, then moderation was indicated.

RESULTS

Exploratory Factor Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was performed on the dependent variable. The results indicated only one factor was extracted to measure the dependent variable, as shown in Table 2. A reliability analysis was run on the dependent variable, as well. The resulting Cronbach's alpha was 0.952.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q7_1badgood	5.8846	1.13469
Q8_1ineffect	5.8269	1.23416
Q9_1notuseful	5.9712	1.11874
Q11_1likeable	6.1827	0.97308
Q12_1unhelpful	6.0192	1.22261

Regression Results

The regression analyses were then conducted. Given the interval dependent variable measures, the summated average was calculated for the values of the dependent variable. The measures for the independent variables were ratio scores, so summations were also created for them. The sales call tools that were considered historical (telephone, fax, and UPS/FedEx) were grouped together and a summation was created. The same procedure was applied to the sales call tools that were considered technologically enhanced (email, texts, social media, Skype, desktop sharing, and websites) and a summation was also created. The types of sales calls were further coded into either/or alignment.

When planning to include the moderation variables in the analysis, examination of only three of the five phases was decided. During the first (attraction) and final (dissolution) phases, the interchanges between buyers and sellers are mostly transactional rather than relational. Therefore, the exploration, expansion, and commitment phases were used.

RESULTS OF HYPOTHESES TESTING

Frequency

Frequency refers to the actual number of times a seller uses each type of sales call. Results for H1a, which positively links the actual number of times sellers use face-to-face sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, yielded a beta of 0.294 ($p < .05$). This hypothesis was supported. The actual number of times sellers use face-to-face sales calls does, therefore, positively impact the buyer's evaluation of the seller. Results for H2a, which positively links the actual number of times sellers use historical sales call tools to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were non-significant. The beta yielded was -0.189 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. Results for H3a, which positively links technologically enhanced sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were non-significant. The results yielded a -0.083 beta ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported.

Moderators

The hypotheses that predicted a moderating effect of the phase of the relationship on the type of sales call tool used and the buyer's evaluation of the seller were tested next. Dummy variables were created to represent each of the categories (k) of nonmetric variables used in the regression analysis. The phases were represented by the following dummy variables: expansion and commitment. Next, the interaction terms were calculated for both actual and alignment variables. Finally, regressions were conducted.

Results for H4a, which predicted the expansion phase moderates the relationship between the seller's frequency of face-to-face sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were not significant. The beta for the interaction term was 0.050 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. Likewise, results for H4b, which predicted the commitment phase moderates the relationship between the seller's frequency of face-to-face sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were not significant, yielding a beta of -0.025 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported.

Results for H4c, which predicted the expansion phase moderates the relationship between the seller's frequency of historical sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were not significant. The beta yielded was -0.040 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. Similarly, results for H4d, which predicted the commitment phase moderates the relationship between the seller's frequency of historical sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were not significant, yielding a beta of 0.287 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. Results for H4e, which predicted the

expansion phase moderates the relationship between the seller's frequency of technologically enhanced sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were not significant. The beta yielded was 0.300 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported.

Results for H4f, which predicted the commitment phase moderates the relationship between the seller's frequency of technologically enhanced sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were significant, yielding a beta of 0.522 ($p < .05$). This hypothesis was supported. The actual number of times sellers use technologically enhanced sales calls during the commitment phase does positively impact the buyer's evaluation of the seller. The summary of results is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Direct Effects of IVs on DVs, Direct Moderator Effects and Interactions terms for type of sales call frequency

Independent Variables: Type of sales calls	Step 1: Direct Effects	Step 2: Direct moderator effect	Step 3: Interactions for FTF-Expan/Comm	Step 4: Interactions for Hist-Expan/Comm	Step 5: Interactions for TE-Expan/Comm
FTFA	0.294 ^{***}	0.307 ^{**}	0.297	0.343 ^{**}	0.317 ^{**}
HistSumA	-0.189	-0.203	-0.218	-0.350	-0.283 ^{**}
TESumA	-0.083	-0.118	-0.105	-0.149	-0.545
Expan		0.301 ^{**}	0.277 ^{**}	0.340 ^{**}	0.234
Comm		0.371 ^{**}	0.387 ^{**}	0.251	0.178
FTFA*Expan			0.050		
FTFA*Comm			-0.025		
HistSum*Expan				-0.040	
HistSum*Comm				0.287	
TESum*Expan					0.300
TESum*Comm					0.522 ^{**}
Adjusted R ²	0.079	0.164	0.149	0.188	0.203
F Change	3.942 ^{**}	6.103 ^{**}	0.127	2.427	3.354 ^{**}
FTFA=Face-to-face actual; HistSumA=Historical actual; TESumA=Technologically Enhanced actual.					
**Significant at .05.					
^a Standardized coefficients are provided.					

Alignment

Alignment refers to the buyer's preferred number of times the seller used the different types of sales calls. The summary of results is provided in Table 4. The results for the alignment hypothesis, H1b, that links the alignment of the number of face-to-face sales calls positively to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, yielded a beta of 0.047 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. The hypothesis which positively links the alignment of seller's use of historical sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of the seller, H2b, was also not significant, yielding beta of -0.040 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. Results for H3b, which links the alignment of seller's use of technologically enhanced sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of the seller was significant and negative. The beta coefficient was -0.288 ($p < .05$). This hypothesis was supported. Results for H4g, which predicted the expansion phase moderates the relationship between the seller's alignment of face-to-face sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were not significant. The beta yielded was -0.068 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. Results for H4h, which predicted the commitment phase moderates the relationship between the seller's alignment of face-to-face sales calls to the buyer's evaluation of sellers, were not significant. The beta yielded was -0.375 ($p > .05$). This hypothesis was not supported. Results for H4i, which predicted the expansion phase would moderate the relationship between the use of historical sales tools and the buyer's evaluation of sellers yielded a beta of 0.036 ($p > .05$).

The commitment phase, H4j, results yielded a beta of 0.116 ($p > .05$). Similarly, the results for the moderation effect of the phases of the relationships on the seller's use of technologically enhanced sales tools were non-significant, as well. The beta for H4k was 0.173 ($p > .05$) and the beta for H4l was 0.119 ($p > .05$).

Table 4: Direct Effects of IVs on DVs, Direct Moderator Effects and Interactions Terms for Type of Sales Call Alignment

Independent Variables: Type of sales calls	Step 1: Direct Effects	Step 2: Direct moderator effect	Step 3: Interactions for FTF-Expan/Comm	Step 4: Interactions for Hist-Expan/Comm	Step 5: Interactions for TE-Expan/Comm
FTFAlign	0.047 ^a	0.096	0.445	0.107	0.075
HistAlign	-0.04	-0.016	-0.064	-0.105	-0.031
TEAlign	-0.288**	-0.259**	-0.271**	-0.256**	-0.405**
Expan		0.187	0.245**	0.183	0.128
Comm		0.315**	0.329**	0.321**	0.265**
FTFAlign*Expan			-0.068		
FTFA*Comm			-0.375		
HistAlign*Expan				0.036	
HistAlign*Comm				0.116	
TEAlign*Expan					0.173
TEAlign*Comm					0.119
Adjusted R ²	0.057	0.102	0.117	0.091	0.104
F Change	3.079**	3.511**	1.798	0.391	1.088
FTFAlign=Face-to-face alignment; HistAlign=Historical alignment; TEAlign=Technologically Enhanced alignment.					
**Significant at .05.					
^a Standardized coefficients are provided.					

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Seller's Frequency of Sales Calls and the Buyer's Evaluation of the Salesperson

The significant relationship between the actual number of times sellers utilizes face-to-face sales calls and the buyer's evaluation of the seller confirms previous research on face-to-face sales calls. According to this finding, buyers generally still prefer richer communication methods, such as face-to-face sales calls, as found in previous research (Cano, Boles, & Bean, 2005; Kirkman, et al., 2004). Support for H1a, therefore, suggests that face-to-face sales calls continue to make a difference for the buyer's evaluation of the seller. The richness of the personal communication provides the seller with valuable information they gain from non-verbal communication, as well as social cues. As firms debate the value of the expense of face-to-face sales calls, this research provides evidence of the benefit of that investment of time and money.

Lack of support for H2a indicates that the number of times sellers use historical sales tools (telephone, fax, and UPS/FedEx) does not impact buyers' evaluations of sellers. One potential explanation for the lack of support of H2a may be the rapid changes taking place with communication tools overall. It may have been difficult for buyers to pinpoint the precise tool the seller used that affected his or her evaluation of the seller as they were bombarded by communications from sellers on a daily basis. Another possible explanation for this surprising result may be that buyers simply take the sellers' use of these tools for granted. For example, buyers may expect a phone call to confirm an appointment or follow up after a meeting.

As technological advances have been made over time, electronic communication tools using the Internet, social media, and related technologies have been used strategically by sellers because of the unique, interactive features of the applications (Rapp & Panagopoulos, 2012; Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012; Rodriguez, et al., 2012). Sellers continue to adapt their selling behavior by using these sales call tools intending to positively influence buyers (Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). Interestingly, however, the lack of support for H3 indicates buyers' evaluations of the seller are not impacted by the number of times seller uses these tools to communicate with them.

Anders, et al. (2020) examine very specific types of sales calls, such as initial contact and cold calls. The authors found buyers' preferences are shifting to more asynchronous communication methods, such as voice mail and email. This may help to explain why these first three hypotheses were not supported in the current study. The unexpected results in this study set the stage for future studies that can expand on the results in this area. For example, examining the use of each specific communication tool and how it impacts the buyer's evaluation may provide useful results. Likewise, future research is needed to build on these findings by examining each step in the sales call process specifically and the buyer's preference at each point in the relationship.

Alignment of Sales Calls and the Buyer's Evaluation of the Salesperson

Lack of support for H1b indicates no significant relationship between the seller's alignment of the number of face-to-face sales calls with the number the buyer expected.

Similarly, H2b was also not supported. The alignment of the number of times sellers used historical sales tools was not significantly related to the buyer's evaluation of the seller. Previous research found a significant relationship between sellers who meet the expected number of sales calls (alignment) and the buyer's evaluation of the seller (Hamwi, et al., 2013). However, this study did not find support for H1b and H2b. Lack of support for these two hypotheses may be in line with more recent research that indicates a shift in buyers' preferences for communication methods (Anders, et al., 2020).

Support was not found for H3b. However, the relationship between the alignment and the perception of the salesperson was significant and negative. This result indicates that as the number of sales calls become more aligned, the impact on the perceptions of the salesperson become more negative. This result is interesting because the expectation would be that the more aligned the sales calls become, the more positive the buyer's perceptions would be.

This may indicate that sending too many emails or more than the buyer would prefer can impact the buyer's evaluation of the seller. Likewise, if the seller is less responsive to the buyer with the use of technologically enhanced sales calls, the buyer's evaluation of the seller will be negatively impacted, as well. This is an important finding, given the tendency of sellers to overwhelm the buyers with too many emails, for example, or "ghosting" the buyer if they ask for information electronically can also have a negative impact on buyers. As the use of technologically enhanced tools continues to expand, it is critical that sellers understand and align their use with the preferences of the buyer. Although technologically enhanced sales tools may be a convenient and cost-effective means of communicating with buyers, sellers who misalign the use of such tools risk making a negative impact on the buyer that can ultimately result in lost revenue.

Moderators

The phases of the relationship were hypothesized to moderate the relationship between the sales call tool and the evaluation of the seller by the buyer. Support for H4f suggests that the actual number of times sellers use technologically enhanced sales calls during the commitment phase does positively impact the buyer's evaluation of the seller. When the buyer-seller relationship reaches the commitment phase, the two become exclusively contracted to each other for a long term. By this phase, the two parties have explored and expanded on their mutually beneficial exchanges and made a conscientious decision to engage in a committed relationship. According to Dwyer, et al., (1987), this phase of the relationship is comparable to the traditional marriage arrangement. Prior to this phase, the parties have tested each other and made adjustments to their relationship, but when they enter into the commitment phase, the standards of communication are well established. Support for this hypothesis, therefore, suggests that the commitment phase of the relationship does impact the strength of the relationship between the number of times the seller calls on them and their perception of the seller.

Implications

The results of this study indicate that while technological advances continue to impact the sales field, face-to-face communication remains a valuable means of building meaningful buyer/seller relationships. This is an important finding, given the trend in the sales field to rely extensively on technological means of communication with buyers. Although face-to-face interactions have been shown to be costly (Weitz, et al., 2007), this study shows that face-to-face sales calls continue to positively impact buyers.

The negative misalignment of technologically enhanced sales calls to the buyer's expectations was an interesting finding, especially since the results of the other hypotheses did not yield significant results. In order to positively impact the perception of the buyer, the seller must match the use of technologically enhanced sales calls to meet the buyer's expectations. This finding is beneficial for salespeople and sales managers alike because even though face-to-face sales calls demand more time and money, they do make a difference for buyers. Practitioners can benefit from the findings of this study by continuing to invest in the value of face-to-face sales calls and seeking to match the ideal number of technologically enhanced sales calls the buyer prefers.

One of the most valuable implications of this research is the indication that buyer's needs may be very specific regarding the type of communication tools used by the seller. Practitioners may use this information to customize their approach with each buyer, possibly asking specific questions to identify buyer's preferences concerning the communication tools used. For example, one buyer may respond more positively if the seller uses only email communication, while another may prefer to meet with the seller in person on a regular basis. Ascertaining these preferences during the early stages of the relationship may help to solidify the valuable long-term partnership between buyers and sellers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all studies, this study has limitations. First, responses from business-to-business buyers from a wide cross-section of industries were included to secure an adequate sample size. In the future, similar research could be applied to specific industries and examining the preferences for different types of sales calls, further progress could be made to benefit salespeople and sales managers alike. Additionally, tests for common method biases were not conducted, as the responses were purchased from a reputable panel providing assurance of effectively prescreened respondents. In future research, these assessments should be included.

Second, the current study did not examine the differences that the experience level of the buyer may have on the preference of seller's use of sales calls. Perhaps, buyers with more experience prefer different types of interactions with sellers than buyers new to the field. Future research focused on the differences between novices and experts would be beneficial.

Third, generational differences were not considered in this study. Results may vary widely for younger buyers and older ones. By examining older buyers who might lack the technological capabilities of their younger counterparts, results may indicate how sellers might best approach buyers within each age group. Younger buyers may not be comfortable meeting strangers in a face-to-face setting and choose to use technologically enhanced sales calls instead.

Fourth, the type of purchase (new, rebuy) or the purchase amount (under \$20,000 or over \$20,000) might moderate the type of sales call preferred by the buyer. For example, a buyer who is sourcing an expensive product or service for the first time might be more positively influenced by a face-to-face sales call than a routine rebuy purchase. Future research should examine additional moderators to gain valuable insight to buyer preferences.

Fifth, each of the categories were mutually exclusive based on the buyer's recall of a specific salesperson. Additional research examining the most effective combination of sales call tools would be very interesting, informing researchers and practitioners alike. Including various tools into a single variable may not explain the most beneficial use of each of the individual tools. Future research should study each of these tools separately, especially given the recent shift to increased online shopping and purchasing.

Sixth, this research examined whether the stage of the buyer-seller relationship impacted the interaction between the independent and dependent variables. Results indicate the stage of the relationship did not impact the buyer's perception of the seller. Future research should, therefore, propose and evaluate the direction of the interaction. Also, this study measured the ideal and actual number of sales calls separately, but measuring the gap between sales calls in future research could produce more meaningful results.

Seventh, this research measured frequency and alignment separately, which may be covering up valuable results. In future research, measuring frequency and alignment together may produce different results. In addition, measuring misalignment rather than alignment in future research might uncover interesting results.

Finally, future research should also focus on the major shift in sales call preferences resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The changes that resulted from the extensive use of virtual platforms would be important to study, as these changes have dramatically impacted most aspects of sales. Future research investigating these changes in sales call preferences and the long-term implications would be useful in understanding their potential affect.

Observations and Conclusions

The linkage between face-to-face sales calls and the buyer's evaluation of the seller produced significant results indicating that buyers continue to respond positively to sellers who use face-to-face contact. This is an important finding, as the trend toward using more electronic sales communication tools continues to climb. Researchers and practitioners alike may reconsider the use of face-to-face communication tools, strategically based on the results of this research.

There was a significant result for the alignment of only the technologically enhanced sales calls. The negative direction of this result indicates that if the number of times sellers used these types of sales tools (emails, webpage links, social media, etc.) is misaligned with the buyer's preferred ideal number of times, then there was a negative impact on the buyer's evaluation. This finding is important because sellers may resort to using technologically enhanced sales tools, rather than face-to-face, but misalignment with these tools is negatively related to buyer's evaluations. As the sales field continues to be revolutionized by technological changes, such as the Internet, social media, and related technologies (Marshall, et al., 2012), the study of sales call communications with buyers will be critical to the success of firms in the future.

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APPENDIX A

Buyer's Survey

Q1. You are invited to participate in a research project. Please answer as truthfully as you can knowing that there are no right or wrong answers. As you respond to the series of questions, please think about your current buyer's position. Your responses are confidential and when the data are analyzed they will not be connected to you individually in any way. Your opinion is important to the success of this research so please be sure to answer every question. The purpose of the study is to determine how buyers evaluate sellers regarding their use of different types of sales calls. Thoughtful answers will enable salespeople to better understand the use of different types of sales calls. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete and participants must be 18 years old or older to participate. In order to ensure your anonymity, no names, personal information, or IP addresses will be collected. By checking the consent box below, you are agreeing to participate in the research project. Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #0112, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591. If you have any questions concerning this survey, please contact me, Judi Billups, at mbillup1@students.kennesaw.edu or by phone at 540-392-4178.

- I confirm that I am 18+ years old and give consent to use the information provided for this research.
- I do not confirm that I am 18+ years old and give consent to use the information provided for this research.

Q2. Do you and your firm meet the following two requirements: 1) Your firm procures products or services from selling firms, and 2) A salesperson makes sales calls on you?

- Yes
- No

Q3. Do you make purchasing decisions for your firm?

- Yes
- No

Q4. Thinking of your buying job duties, focus on a specific salesperson that you have recently interacted with. What company does that salesperson work for?

Q5. Thinking of the same specific salesperson, how often has this salesperson used the following to communicate with you over the last four weeks? Indicate the number in the boxes provided. If none, indicate "0" for that specific item.

- Face-to-face sales calls
- Personal phone calls or conference calls
- Text messaging
- Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube)
- Skype or WebEx
- Desktop Sharing or Doc Exchange
- Sending or receiving a Fax
- Sending something through UPS, FedEx, or US Mail
- Sending or receiving something through email
- Links to websites
- Other: please specify

Q6. Thinking of the same specific salesperson, what is the ideal number of times you would have preferred the salesperson to have used the following over the last four weeks? Indicate the number in the boxes provided. If none, indicate "0" for that specific item.

- Face-to-face sales calls
- Personal phone calls or conference calls
- Text messaging
- Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube)
- Skype or WebEx
- Desktop Sharing or Doc Exchange

Sending or receiving a Fax
 Sending something through UPS, FedEx, or US Mail
 Sending or receiving something through email
 Links to websites
 Other: please specify

Q7. Thinking about the same salesperson, please rate the salesperson along the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bad: Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q8. Thinking about the same salesperson, please rate the salesperson along the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ineffective: Effective	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q9. Thinking about the same salesperson, please rate the salesperson along the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not useful: Useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q10. Thinking about the same salesperson, please select the option closest to strongly disagree for the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree: Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11. Thinking about the same salesperson, please rate the salesperson along the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Unlikeable: Likable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12. Thinking about the same salesperson, please rate the salesperson along the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Unhelpful: Helpful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13. Typically, buyers and sellers progress through different relationship phases as they initiate, build, and develop interdependence on one another. Briefly describe your current relationship with this specific salesperson.

Q14. Which of the following categories best describes your current relationship with this salesperson.

- You are just becoming aware of this salesperson.
- You are discussing and negotiating the potential opportunities of working with this salesperson.
- You are increasing your reliance and dependence on this salesperson for more and more products and/or services.
- You have an exclusive relationship with this salesperson and are not purchasing comparable products/services from a competitor.
- You are considering not continuing the relationship with the salesperson.
- Other: please specify _____

Q15. What is your current job title?

Q16. How many years have you been in your current position? Please round to the nearest whole year.

Q17. How many years have you been working in purchasing? Please round to the nearest whole year.

Q18. In what industry do you purchase?

Q19. Thinking of the purchases you make, estimate what percentage of are for products and services.

_____ Products
_____ Services

Q20. How many hours do you work at your current purchasing job in a typical week?

Q21. What is your total annual compensation for purchasing job in US dollars?

Q22. In a typical year, estimate your total volume in US dollars that you purchase?

Q23. What is the scope of your organization?

- International only
- Domestic only
- Domestic and International

Q24. Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female

Q25. What is your age?

Q26. Please indicate your highest level of education.

- Some high school (no diploma)
- High school (diploma)
- Some college (no degree)
- College (undergraduate degree)
- Some graduate school (no degree)
- Graduate school (graduate degree)
- Other, please specify _____

Q27. What is your race?

- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- White, non-Hispanic
- Two or more races
- Other (specify) _____

Q28. Do you reside in the United States?

- Yes
- No