

Salesforce transformation to solution selling

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A central part of a manufacturer's transformation to solution selling involves recruiting and training salespersons who enact the critical relational processes of solution selling at the customer interface. Such solution selling involvement by the salespeople plays a key role in ensuring subsequent solution selling performance. However, given that the requirements for solution selling differ drastically from product selling, ensuring salesperson solution selling involvement is a challenging task in a transformation context. Given these difficulties, we suggest that the manufacturer undergoing a solution transformation can choose between two approaches. One alternative is to create a dedicated solution selling salesforce staffed with salespeople who possess the right set of motivations and abilities. The other is to implement a broader transformation program that facilitates the ability of the existing product-centric salesforce to engage in solution selling. It is likely that a dedicated solution salesforce staffed with suitable salespeople precedes a broader salesforce wide transformation.

Keywords: Customer solutions, solution selling, salesforce transformation, sales management

1. INTRODUCTION

Few manufacturers have eluded the imperative to go “downstream” in the value chain (Wise & Baumgartner, 1999), and for many, this has meant the adoption of a solutions-based business approach. The organizationally complex transformation from product selling to solution selling places new requirements on the sales function at both the organization and individual salesperson levels (Reinartz & Ulaga, 2008; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014; Worm et al., 2017; Panagopoulos et al., 2017).

In particular, recent research has recognized the critical role salespeople play in developing solution offerings and communicating their value-in-use potential to customers (Panagopoulos et al., 2017). This salesperson solution selling enactment plays a critical role in subsequent solution selling performance (Panagopoulos et al., 2017). However, many product-oriented salespeople are reluctant and/or unable to engage in solution selling (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014), which presents a major constraint on the manufacturer’s servitization efforts.

To advance the theory and practice of servitization, the purpose of this book chapter is to describe the requirements of solution selling at the salesforce level, which then forms the basis for building appropriate organizational structures and forms of support to facilitate a salesforce-wide transformation to solution selling.

This review is organized as follows: First, we provide an overview of the conceptual foundations of solution selling and position it in the wider servitization stream of research. Second, we explain how the understanding of the requirements posed by solution selling has progressed from an

analysis of organizational-level conditions to the individual salesperson level. Third, we discuss how an organization can facilitate a salesforce-level transformation to solution selling.

2. THEORY DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Conceptual foundations of solution selling

The roots of academic discussion on the concept of solution selling trace back to engineering practices, when suppliers of military weapons systems in the 1940s and 1950s began to develop better ways of managing the development and delivery of complex weapons systems (Hobday et al., 2005). Industrial marketing scholars picked up the idea of selling complex product systems through the concept of systems selling (see e.g., Mattsson, 1973). Systems selling required a change in the sales approach of industrial products (Page & Siemplenski, 1983) through the incorporation of a consultative orientation (Hanan, 1986). Later, “system” was specified to refer to a physical product system, whereas a solution was said to incorporate, in addition to the physical product system, strategic and consultative business activities (Davies et al., 2006).

From these conceptual origins, research on solution selling later evolved further as part of the interdisciplinary servitization stream of research (Vandermerwe & Rada, 1988). Viewed through the servitization lens, solution selling represents an enactment of the service-dominant logic on behalf of manufacturers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008) as they gradually transition to providing more advanced services (Salonen, 2011). This typically means extending the manufacturer’s scope of supply through the integration of previously disintegrated product-based components into functional systems (Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 2008) and the deployment of output-based

services that target the customer's process (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). In doing so, the manufacturer's focus shifts to a collaborative process of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), as it engages customers in relational processes during the various phases of the solution life cycle that precede and follow the integration of product- and/or service-based components into customized responses to complex customer needs (Evanschitzky et al., 2011; Tuli et al., 2007).

2.2 Organizational requirements of solution selling

A principle challenge for a manufacturer undergoing a solution transformation is building an organization that is able to interact with the customer in fundamentally different ways. Managers reared up in product-based organizations excel at designing and manufacturing superior products, as well as managing the processes involved in making and selling them. Thus, the transformation to solution selling requires the development of new organizational capabilities and structures.

To mitigate these challenges, Davies et al. (2006) suggest setting up an organizational structure composed of a customer-facing front-end organization, a supportive back-end organization, and a flexible core that provides oversight, coordination, and leadership for effectively delivering standardized, repeatable solutions. The customer facing front-end is responsible for capturing customer insights and transferring the learnings to the back-end organization. The customer-facing front-end organization also manages strategic engagements with the customer and develops value propositions, integrates solutions, and provides operational services (Storbacka, 2011). Due to the high degree of trust and collaboration needed in the co-creation of customer solutions, the seller typically initially develops solutions with a limited number of key customers (Cova & Salle, 2007). Experimentation with lead customers then allows the vendor to develop effective value propositions as well as value quantification and verification tools, as it builds organizational

capabilities for value-based selling in the solution business context (Terho et al., 2012; Terho et al., 2017; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015).

While the customer-facing units described above are in charge of developing commercialization capabilities that ensure value creation through the solution business model, the back end takes charge of ensuring the manufacturer's value capture ability (Storbacka, 2011). At the core of these efforts lies the implementation of the principle of modularity (Davies et al., 2006). This means limiting variety through the definition of a clear solution architecture that specifies the modules that make up the solution, which allows salespeople to sell mass customized solutions (Storbacka, 2011; Salonen, 2011; Kowalkowski et al., 2015; Salonen et al., 2018). In cases of highly complex, fully tailored turnkey solutions, opportunities to modularize the offering are limited (Salonen & Jaakkola, 2015). In these cases, a separate project organization unit staffed with suitable individuals typically handles the solution selling and delivery.

If the firm is able to modularize the solution offering, this builds the organizational readiness to implement a broader solution transformation through repeatable, mass-customized solutions that enable better value capture (Salonen et al., 2018). However, the transformation is constrained by the fact that the salesperson-level requirements for solution selling are vastly different from those of product selling (Reinartz & Ulaga, 2008; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). Since replacing large portions of the salesforce is costly and disruptive to existing business and sales routines, manufacturers undergoing a solution transformation need to find ways to deal with this constraint. The first step in addressing this challenge is to develop an in-depth understanding of how these requirements differ, as this will form the basis for building the appropriate organizational structures and forms of support to facilitate a salesforce transformation to solution selling.

2.3 Salesperson-level requirements in solution selling (selling process and proficiencies)

The seminal study by Tuli et al. (2007) introduced a customer-centric view of solution business. According to this perspective, customers ultimately judge solutions as relational processes instead of customized and integrated bundles of goods and services. Consequently, an effective solution-selling process should go beyond the mere task of customizing an offering to meet customer needs. The requirements' definition, deployment, and post-deployment support arise as additional critical components of solution provision for customers, and thus call for a relational sales process.

Salespeople play a key role in implementing these four stages into practice through solution selling involvement, which captures the degree to which a salesperson engages in activities that help his/her firm provide end-to-end solutions for the salesperson's customers (Panagopoulos et al., 2017). The initial phases of this process focus on gaining a deep understanding of the customer's business and designing effective solutions for the customer's needs. In later stages, salespeople need to ensure the correct delivery of the solution and to maintain a continuous and supportive dialogue with the customer after deployment of the solution into the customer's process. Such an involvement is systematically linked to increased sales performance and is stronger under higher levels of a firm's product portfolio scope, sales unit cross-functional cooperation, and customer-supplier relationship tie strength (Panagopoulos et al., 2017).

Along similar lines, Worm et al. (2017) demonstrated that a firm's solution sales capabilities, defined as the degree to which the salesforce is able to identify the appropriate decision makers and provide proficient justification for the solutions offering, are critical for their solution selling performance. Ulaga and Kohli (2018) further note that salespeople play a key role in reducing the

customer's need uncertainty, process uncertainty, and outcome uncertainty during the different stages of the solution selling process. To do so, salespeople need to provide pertinent information to key stakeholders within the customer and supplier organizations, and to encourage adaptive behavior of the parties involved. Thus, salespeople need to be able to demonstrate the value-in-use potential of the abstract offerings often by engaging new types of customer stakeholders, such as business decision makers, instead of buyers (Terho et al., 2012, 2017).

Previous solution selling research has thus provided strong evidence for the critical role salespeople play in the context of solution selling. At the same time, it appears difficult to build the required salesperson-level competences. Bonney and Williams (2009), in their conceptual study, were among the first to argue that the salesperson-level requirements of solution selling are fundamentally different from those of product selling. Subsequently, several authors have explored the specific nature of these requirements. For instance, Ulaga and Loveland's (2014) qualitative study among top managers provided a structured exploration of key salesperson proficiencies and required personality traits in solution selling. They identified 13 traits that help salespeople develop the required proficiencies to succeed in solution selling. These include high learning, customer service, and teamwork orientation, as well as intrinsic motivation and general intelligence.

Other studies have elaborated on these traits. For instance, Friend and Malshe (2016) found that salespeople need to possess network and relationship management-specific skills to craft customer solutions in an ecosystem context. Key skills include diversity sensitivity, multipoint probing, orchestration, and stability preservation. Koponen et al. (2019), in turn, elaborate on the broader communication competences required for international solution selling, relating them to four

components: behavioral, affective, cognitive, and general sales acumen. Behavioral competence helps salespeople to act effectively in interactions through relational communication skills, personal selling skills, and language skills. Affective competence refers to the motivation to engage in interpersonal interaction, manifested in motivations, positive and open attitudes, and cultural sensitivity. Cognitive competence refers to the knowledge and understanding of effective and appropriate interpersonal communication behaviors. Finally, sales acumen is related to sales-specific knowledge and skills, including the strategic understanding of business-to-business sales and leadership skills.

Böhm et al. (2020) empirically studied the antecedents and outcomes of salespeople's value opportunity recognition (VOR) competence. VOR refers to the cognitive process that individual salespeople use to detect misallocations of resources, define associated customer problems, and develop solutions that generate value for the customer and profit for the supplier (Bonney & Williams, 2009). Böhm et al. (2020) found that customer knowledge is the key driver of VOR, and salespeople can compensate for a lack of technical knowledge by forging strong relationships with the back-end organization, thus implying the need for a team selling structure for solution sales. The formalization of sales hinders the salesperson's ability to leverage their customer relationships for VOR but helps them to work more effectively with the back-end organization to recognize value opportunities (Böhm et al., 2020).

2.4 Key ways to implement a salesforce transformation to solution selling

At the organizational level, firms have two options for initiating solution sales. One is to build up a dedicated solution unit staffed with individuals with the appropriate capabilities, experience, and

personality traits. The second is to implement a broader, salesforce-wide transformation to solution selling.

Regarding a salesforce-wide transformation to solution selling, some argue that the requirements of product selling and solution selling differ so substantially that firms that want to develop an organizational capability to sell solutions need to recruit new salespeople for the solution selling tasks (Reinartz & Ulaga, 2008; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). This challenge is caused by a total re-orientation in the required selling approach. Different personality traits are even potentially required, which are difficult to change with mere training and compensation schemes. However, recent research suggests that product-centric salespeople can be engaged in solution selling if the organization provides appropriate support tailored to individual salespeople's needs (Salonen et al., 2020).

In the initial stages of a manufacturer's solution transformation, a dedicated solution-selling salesforce typically makes the most sense. Levihn and Levihn (2016) found in the case organization they studied that those sales branches that separated the solution business from the product business were more successful. Best practice units hired new salespeople for the solution selling task from their customers as a way to gain the required in-depth understanding of the customer's industry, business model, and underlying needs (Levihn & Levihn, 2016). Organizational separation also finds strength from the findings of Paiola et al. (2012), who found, in the context of service sales, that organizational separation of a newly recruited salesforce improved the commitment and financial performance of the new salesforce.

At the same time, a key challenge related to the creation of a dedicated solution salesforce is that it is costly to implement and places limits on the manufacturer's ability to follow the industrialization path to service-based growth (Kowalkowski et al., 2015). In these cases, solutions sales typically represent a relatively small proportion of the firm's overall operations and consist of project-based, fully tailored solutions with customer-specific, premium pricing. Yet, in many cases, firms will want to strive for a broader shift to solution business by investing in the development of modular solution architecture and the associated organizational processes (Salonen et al., 2018; Rajala et al., 2019). In these cases, the manufacturer needs to consider whether and how it can implement a broader salesforce-wide transformation to solution selling that involves its existing product-centric salesforce.

While the development of sufficient industrialization capabilities removes many of the organizational constraints of a salesforce-wide transformation to solution selling, managing the transformation process is still far from easy given the vastly different salesperson-level requirements. However, as demonstrated by Salonen et al. (2020), it is possible, albeit with some restrictions. More specifically, the study reveals that not all salespeople can engage in a solution transformation, as there are necessary threshold requirements in the form of salesperson value-based selling capability (Terho et al., 2012, 2017). However, beyond this threshold condition, a heterogeneous salesforce can engage if the organization offers the right type of transformation support.

The required type of organizational support depends on the salesperson's characteristics. While some exceptional and highly motivated salespersons with prior experience in selling complex offerings transition virtually without any organizational support, others need exhaustive support.

Salespeople who are typically the most difficult to transform perceive a transition to solution selling as risky and have no prior experience in solution sales. Firms can provide the needed support through either top-down organizational actions or, more informally, operational-level support. Organizational support can take place through training or communication of expectations by sales management, whereas dedicated solution champions who engage in market shaping (Nenonen et al., 2019) offer operational-level support to salespeople (Salonen et al., 2020).

The finding regarding the role of solution champion market-shaping suggests that organizational support required in a transformational context extends beyond the boundaries of the focal organization. This is because a large-scale transformation from product selling to solution selling often requires negotiation of institutional resistance from customers (Hartmann et al., 2018), which is beyond the capacity of any individual salesperson. Solution champions can help the salesperson redesign the exchange, reconfigure the networks of the actors, or reform institutions (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2011; Baker et al., 2019; Nenonen et al., 2019). In doing so, they create opportunities for salespeople to engage in solution selling.

Lastly, solution selling and value-based selling studies indicate that sales organizations should always provide their salespeople with a basic toolset to succeed in solution selling during all phases of the sales cycle (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). In the initial phases of sales, clear sales strategy elements facilitate solution selling effectiveness. Segmentation and prioritization schemes help salespeople to better understand customer requirements and to target resource-intensive solution selling investments for those customers who are best served through solution-selling initiatives (see Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010; Terho et al., 2015; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). Similarly, the development of clear relationship objectives, selling models, and different sales channels to reach

and serve different types of customers helps salespeople to effectively adapt the selling process to different customers (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). This is particularly important in cases when industrial companies continue to maintain their traditional offerings while expanding into solution business through servitization. In such a situation, some customers may wish to merely place orders for fairly standardized offerings, while others may need a complex solution that is integrated as a fully tailor-made project. Customers who do not require the salesperson's expertise can largely manage their own purchase journeys through automated, often web-based channels, while others will need extensive support through a dedicated salesforce.

3. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter was to develop an understanding of the requirements of solution selling at the salesforce level, which forms the basis for building appropriate organizational structures and forms of support to facilitate a salesforce-wide transformation to solution selling. Based on this review, we conclude that solution selling involvement by salespeople plays a key role in ensuring subsequent solution selling performance (Panagopoulos et al., 2017; Worm et al., 2017). However, given that the requirements for solution selling differ drastically from those of product selling, facilitating salesperson solution selling involvement is difficult to realize in practice.

Rather than attempt an immediate firm-wide transformation to solution selling, we suggest that the manufacturer proceed in stages. In the first stage, setting up a dedicated solution salesforce and staffing it with suitable salespeople is a good way to initiate the complex transformation. Such a unit can recruit salespeople with appropriate capabilities, experience, and personality traits (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). Alternatively, the manufacturer could scan the existing salesforce for suitable

individuals. Here, the presence of value-based selling capability is a necessary threshold competence (Terho et al., 2012, 2017; Salonen et al., 2020). Additionally, skills such as communication competence (Koponen et al., 2019) and attitudes such as learning orientation, intrinsic motivation, and teamwork orientation (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014) are likely to support salespeople's success in solution selling.

At the same time, to realize a large-scale solution transformation, manufacturers need to find ways of engaging salespeople who may not possess the optimal set of skills, attitudes, or personality traits. Doing so is possible as long as the manufacturer 1) understands that a salesforce transformation to solution selling is both an individual- and organizational-level phenomenon, and 2) is able to manage the complex interplay of these conditions (Salonen et al., 2020). This includes the provision of appropriate organizational support tailored to individual salespeople's needs. Additionally, organizations should provide supportive sales tools for the salesforce, including documented reference cases, solution configurators, and value quantification and pricing tools (Terho et al., 2017; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015).

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