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# Making B2B Sales Interactions Valuable

A Social and Symbolic Perspective

Lena Hohenschwert



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*To mum and dad*



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March, 2013

Lena Hohenschwert

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# Chapter One - Introduction

*The salesperson pulls out a packaging sample that he has developed for the customer with his colleagues from the design department. The customer examines the sample.*

Customer: 'Isn't the lid a bit too thick?'

Salesperson: 'No, I think B-wave [corrugated material] is right, we could maybe drop a little bit in quality, but I would stick to B-wave because otherwise you will always have this buckle in front.' (Continues explaining the sample)

C: 'OK OK. Why is it so long here? Isn't that unnecessary?'

S: 'No, without it, it can move around too much.'

C: 'But we pack the products with their boxes into the packaging.'

S: 'No, this one's for use without the small boxes, so that the packaging can be smaller. That saves material and space on the pallet.'

C: 'Hmm, but that was not the point. In the handling they just pack the different boxes into the packaging.'

S: 'But then you really use the pallet poorly, it's now optimized.'

C: 'But they don't take the different boxes with the packaged content and throw them out again before they put them into the packaging. That would be stupid, too. It's a packaging for mixed products which they assemble at the handling desk.'

...

*The conversation is followed by a technical discussion in which the salesperson juggles some ideas on how to construct the packaging to satisfy the customer's internal requirements. After a while, the salesperson promises to hold in mind the customer's concerns when reconstructing the packaging and they shift to other projects they need to discuss. They finish the meeting with another cup of coffee and the customer starts a discussion on soccer and company cars.*

There are many things that come to mind when reading this short excerpt of a sales interaction and many ways in which one could interpret it. I will here attempt to reflect on this interaction using the theoretical construct of value. Value and its creation have been conceptualized in various and partially contradicting ways by the literature that relates to the context of sales interactions in business-to-business markets. I will discuss these by raising the question whether this interaction illustrates an empirical incidence of value, and if so, how this value is created or perceived to be created.

## Problematizing Value Literature

The *B2B sales literature* has recently become more interested in the value concept. Most researchers agree on the salesperson's role as value creator (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Kaario, Pennanen, Storbacka & Mäkinen, 2004; Anderson, Kumar & Narus, 2007; Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010; Töytäri, Alejandro, Parvinen, Ollila & Rosendahl, 2011; Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos & Sager, 2012; Dixon & Tanner Jr, 2012; Haas, Snehota & Corsaro, 2012; Terho, Haas, Eggert & Ulaga, 2012). According to the literature, the salesperson is supposed to understand a customer problem or identify value creation possibilities in the form of opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness in the customer business. Further, as an expert or advisor, the salesperson should create a solution for the identified problem, implement and integrate it with the use of the own company resources (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Anderson et al., 2007; Tuli, Kohli & Bharadwaj, 2007; Sharma, Iyer & Evanschitzky, 2008). Underlying this role description of the value creator are system-level values such as efficiency and effectiveness that contribute to increased profit and ultimately carry monetary or financial value for the customer. This monetary or financial value should subsequently be communicated to the customer in order to have an objective and transparent platform on which to negotiate the price the customer is willing to pay in exchange (Anderson et al., 2007; Terho et al., 2012).

The present literature on salesperson and customer interactions suggests that the salesperson, indeed, creates value in this interaction. The salesperson is almost exemplary in following the prescribed way of value creation where he or she identifies a problem or opportunity to save wasting space in palletizing for the

customer. In tune with this way of working the salesperson also integrates the own expertise and involves the colleagues from the design department to create a solution to the problem. Where the salesperson might not follow the ideal that is depicted in literature is in the communication of value, by not demonstrating the customer savings generated through the cost savings. Consequently, the salesperson fails to convince the customer of the value created for him or her. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the sales literature, the salesperson improves the efficiency of the customer's processes with the new design, saves the customer transport costs, and as a consequence creates value for the customer.

Looking back at the brief example, it seems, however, that none of the individuals have accomplished their intentions in this interaction. Therefore, the reasoning that the salesperson has created value does not seem convincing, nor to be a fair judgment of the situation. The reactions of the customer and the course of the interaction do not suggest that this interaction ended in the salesperson and the customer being satisfied, that is feeling that they got what they wanted from the interaction. This challenges the conceptualization of value in sales research for it is unable to explain how value is created in the interaction between these individuals. In other words, why does this conceptualization give a seemingly unrealistic account of the empirical incident and how would an alternative interpretation look in terms of value?

The first problem that I want to address is the underlying assumption of value being created by one person for the other, the possibility for the salesperson to bring value into the interaction for the customer. Hence, it is the notion that value is somewhat objective; it is not dependent on the individual or on the context, nor is it portrayed to be dynamic. In this conceptualization, value can therefore be identified, created and delivered or communicated from the seller to the buyer (Anderson & Narus, 1998; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Kaario et al., 2004; Anderson, Narus & Narayandas, 2009; Terho et al., 2012). The brief example interaction that introduced this chapter, however, suggests that the understanding of value as a given, collective judgment of effectiveness and efficiency, might not be applicable to the relationship between salesperson and customer. The same customer might have reacted differently on another day in another interaction, so might a different customer, or the interaction might have evolved to suggest an interpretation of value creation to be increased efficiency and effectiveness. The given example of an interaction between salesperson and

customer, however, suggests that the customer did not appreciate the improvement nor perceived it as valuable. Thus, it implies that the reason why the conceptualization of *value creation within the sales literature does not give an accurate account of the interaction is that it overlooks the individuality, context and dynamic of value.*

Since sales interactions in a B2B context are one of the main linkages between businesses, the *B2B marketing* field and research from the *service marketing* field that has been adopted and integrated by B2B marketing researchers, offer another interpretive framework to try to explain the interaction. In the last decade, researchers in these two fields have encouraged the idea that value is not inherent in a product or offering but created and determined in the interaction between the supplier and customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Grönroos, 2008; Ford, 2011). This shift towards an interaction-based understanding (Haas et al., 2012) of value creation has been developed based on the ideas of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) tradition in business interactions and the service logics within the service marketing literature that claim business interactions to become more service-like (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Grönroos, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Underlying the notion of value being created in interaction between two parties is the interpretive and contextual nature of value (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Woodruff & Flint, 2006; Edvardsson, Tronvoll & Gruber, 2011; Ford, 2011). In other words, it cannot simply be created or provided by one party to another but it is phenomenologically perceived (Lusch & Vargo, 2006) or interpreted (Ford, 2011) by the beneficiary. This conceptualization applied to sales interactions allows the interpretation of alternative constructs to money as symbolizing value for the customer, such as, assurance or help. In fact it could be anything that occurs or transpires throughout interaction as a result of interpretation.

This conceptualization of value seems preferable when interpreting why the interaction described developed as it did. More convincing in the light of the customer's reactions is to argue that value has not 'actually' been created from the perspective of the customer because he or she does not seem to perceive the interaction as valuable. When the salesperson is dependent on the customer's interpretation in the value creation efforts, it also means that salespeople cannot create value without interacting with the customer. While this explains why value was not accomplished in the example interaction, it does not indicate how

this interpretive, contextual and interactive value may be created by the salesperson.

Arguably there is a *dilemma or misfit in the B2B marketing literature*. While the researchers seem to agree on the interpretive and contextual nature of value (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Woodruff & Flint, 2006; Edvardsson et al., 2011; Ford, 2011), they discuss the creation of value from a company perspective. The possibility to capture the interpretation of value in interaction from this perspective is, however, a moot point. Undoubtedly companies have relationships but it is the individuals that engage in the interpretation process, which is idiosyncratic to each individual, negotiated and (re-) negotiated in each interaction. The conceptualizations of value creation as resource integration (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008) or as problem solving (Ford, 2011) therefore offer fewer micro-level explanations that can be applied to sales interactions. Considering these two concepts, resource integration and problem solving, one could argue again that the salesperson has created value in the interaction, as he or she has solved what is considered to be a problem for the customer and has integrated resources in the form of their own knowledge and the designer's work, into the interaction. They do, however, not explain why value might not have been created in this interaction, given that resources were integrated and the problem was addressed. Summarizing this discussion I want to argue that *without understanding the interaction between individuals, researchers and practitioners will not gain insight on how value is manifested* when it is neither inherent in the characteristics of a tangible object, such as a product, nor lies, (or at least not only), in established collective judgments such as efficiency and effectiveness.

The above discussion as to why the relevant literature on value and value creation in a B2B context does not suffice to explain the empirical phenomenon of a sales interaction carves out my research problem: There is *little in-depth understanding in research, or in practice, of the phenomenon of value and its creation in sales interactions* that are part of the everyday realities of businesses and certainly crucial for business survival. While some researchers might doubt the relevance and feasibility of a theoretical value discussion in the context of sales interactions, I will lean on the literature that creates and emphasizes this synthesis (e.g. Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010; Blocker et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2012).



## Sales Interactions as Value Setting

Despite the insufficient understanding of value within the current literature, it does in fact partly support the pursuit of conceptualizing sales interactions as incidents of value creation. The relational perspective in business marketing literature has highlighted the interactive and interdependent nature of business exchanges (Grönroos, 1997; Ford, 2002), and influenced the conception of value creation to be a common effort in the interaction between businesses. This perspective points strongly to necessary knowledge of the nature and characteristics of the interaction when studying value creation (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Grönroos & Helle, 2010; Ford, 2011; Haas et al., 2012). Even though the conceptualization of value creation in business marketing has yet to incorporate the interactiveness and dynamics of value creation, the literature would most likely concur with the importance of the salesperson in value creation. Especially in the context of services-based (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Penttinen & Palmer, 2007; Jacob & Ulaga, 2008; Raddats & Easingwood, 2010; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011) or non-standardized markets (Darr, 2006), where a tangible product may not be of great importance in many of the interactions, the sales role has been assigned more importance in value creation than in standard product selling (Sharma, 2007; Storbacka, Ryals, Davies & Nenonen, 2009; Davies, Ryals & Holt, 2010; Dixon & Tanner Jr, 2012).

More often than not, B2B interactions are characterized by multiple players of each party being involved (Jones, Dixon, Chonko & Cannon, 2005), however, in most cases a dedicated salesperson is responsible for developing the relationship with the customer. As the main contact between seller and buyer company, he or she manages the direct contacts and holds an overview of the indirect ones, such as between internal sales and customer. The salesperson spans the boundary between production, engineering and customer company and is thereby involved in many interactions between customer and seller company. This, however, requires him or her to interact not only with different individuals at the customer but also with internal colleagues from different functions, such as research and development staff or production employees. Hence, the sales interactions do not only involve delivery and payment, but a multitude of other interactions, such as idea generation, development, delivery, implementation, etc. Consequently, selling in B2B non-standardized markets can no longer be understood in the narrow sense of the provision of a product

but as embracing all interactions of the external salesperson with internal colleagues, customer contacts or third parties that are somehow related to a customer project. This variety in interactions that constitutes sales work and the role in value creation is summarized in a recent definition of selling as

‘a phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context.’ (Dixon & Tanner Jr, 2012:10)

The *inherent purpose of selling, as portrayed in this literature, is that of creating value*. It suggests that the salesperson gains his or her job legitimacy from the ability of creating value for their company and that is often contingent on the ability to create value for the customer.

I want to propose another starting point for the argumentation that selling is a viable context to conceptualize value and its creation. For interactions between individuals to work out, that is to continue or be repeated, those individuals involved need to perceive the interaction as positive (Charon, 2007). This claim holds the assumption that there are no other reasons in the form of dependencies or constraints why the interaction between the individuals has to continue. For example, if a student does not consider the interaction with his or her teacher or supervisor as valuable, he or she still might not interrupt the interaction for fear of the consequences. Given sales interactions without strong dependencies, the customer is *only likely to continue the interaction if he or she evaluates the interaction positively* or as potentially positive in the near future. Arguably, if salespeople were interested in creating value, they would intend the customer to evaluate the interaction positively, that is, to consider it valuable. The customer interactions would then be more likely to continue with the salesperson creating value for the company when building and retaining customer relationships. Hence, with individuals evaluating the interaction as to whether to continue, change or interrupt it, value is likely to come about as a result of this evaluation process (Svensson, 2010).

The characteristics of the B2B non-standardized market context further emphasize the need to investigate value in sales interactions. This context entails building the solutions or products in a *‘craft-like production mode’* throughout interactions but with no pre-existing set of application possibilities (Darr, 2002:51). The lack of a reference product decreases the possibility for comparing what could facilitate a value judgment, and instead it is the

interaction as such that is evaluated which is inherently unique and idiosyncratic. Hence, the customer can neither relate a product to a standard market nor use a standard formula for evaluation, which makes evaluation and thus value more ambiguous (Smith, 1989). Moreover, in non-standardized selling the salesperson's insights about the customer's potential problem are elusive and the customer has little information about a potential solution or its characteristics (Darr, 2002). The lack of tangible products also reduces the occurrence of already established symbolic significances to which individuals assign value (Prus, 1989).

*The B2B sales interactions in non-standardized markets are thus not only an empirical setting where one can assume value to emerge but also one where value is likely to be more ambiguous* and the construction of value in the interaction from the salesperson's perspective intriguing and relevant. In the light of the elaborated context of B2B, the existing theoretical conceptualizations of what constitutes value creation in business interactions are challenged for their sufficiency. This understanding, however, is not only relevant for developing theory but also for practice. Many manufacturing businesses have moved into services-based or non-standardized markets by offering services and solutions (Gebauer & Friedli, 2005; Jacob & Ulaga, 2008; Penttinen & Palmer, 2007; Raddats & Easingwood, 2010). The reason is the challenge manufacturers have to meet in order to gain profit because of marginal product differentiation and the low importance for and impact on the customer business (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002). This commoditization problem (Rangan & Bowman, 1992) creates the necessity for manufacturing businesses to find other ways to create value for the customer and thus encourage them to pay a higher price. It stands to reason that one way is the salesperson interaction with the customer, as discussed above. Hence, understanding value and its creation in sales interactions is highly relevant for companies in B2B markets facing product commoditization.

# The Focus on the Individual

The discussion of the relevant literature suggests that the role of the individual is neglected in the underlying objective notion of value and the ignorance about its dynamic character in the sales literature, as well as the company perspective conceptualizations within the business marketing field. In the case of the business marketing literature, the played-down role of the individual (Brennan & Turnbull, 2002; Ford, 2011; Axelsson & Baraldi, 2013) seems surprising in the light of the interpretive and contextual understanding of value (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Woodruff & Flint, 2006; Edvardsson et al., 2011; Ford, 2011). One of the reasons for this situation might be the lack of investigations into the empirical reality of individuals and their activities in settings where value is assumed to come about. This lack of focus on the individual's role in value creation, however, seems to be a meaningful reason for the inability of this literature to explain the course of the interaction.

The short excerpt of a sales interaction quoted at the beginning of this chapter highlights the importance of the individuals in the course and outcome of any business interaction. It exemplifies an interaction where neither of the individuals seems to act in relation to their own company's interests. The purchaser fears the change in packaging design as it entails internal change and thus more work for him or her. The salesperson does not follow through in the 'ideal' way for value creation by failing to convince the customer of the savings and conforming to what the customer wants. Thus, the excerpt highlights that individuals are not only company representatives that one can understand through the company perspective, but require 'zooming in' in order to understand their acts when facing practical reality in their day-to-day work. This might sound like common sense perhaps but research in business marketing would benefit from acknowledging that business interactions build on individuals meeting, which can then be translated into company level. The disregard of the individual when trying to understand business marketing may result in compromising the practical relevance (Brennan & Turnbull, 2002; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

Hence, *in order to shed light on how interpreted and contextually sensitive value arises in interactions between businesses, research needs to look at what is actually happening in the interactions between the individuals involved.* Other than being

problem solvers, experts or resource integrators, salespeople are persons who act and react on the basis of their goals and their own interpretations of the situation. Only by exploring what they do in interactions and how their acts are related to former actions or interactions and to potential future consequences as well as to the other individual's actions and reactions, is it possible to reach an understanding of the reasons behind the acts. Hence, understanding what individuals do, in a setting where value is assumed, could provide us with concrete, practical insights on value and the activities around it in business marketing.

## Purpose Statement

I have motivated the need to focus on individuals in business interactions to enrich and advance one of the most popular discussions in business marketing, that of value and its creation. I have, moreover, put forward reasons for the importance of taking the individuals into account to complement the existing conceptualizations. This is reinforced by empirical impression that the individual matters in shaping the interactions and their outcome, as I have illustrated with the help of the short sales interaction excerpt. Moreover, the need for this perspective is supported by the inability of the existing literature in both business marketing and sales to explain the interaction between individuals of a business context with regard to value. There is indeed a misfit of the value creation conceptualizations in business marketing with the recent developments of the literature discussing value as interpretive and contextual.

I have thus carved out the research problem in this study to be the insufficient understanding of value and its creation in B2B sales interactions. Sales interactions in B2B non-standardized markets are a context of particular value ambiguity and thus an intriguing empirical setting to investigate the value constructed in the interpersonal interaction between salesperson and customer contact. While not every sales interaction might be evaluated positively by those involved, for interactions between salesperson and customer to continue or be repeated in the longer run, they need to be considered as valuable or as having the potential of being valuable by salesperson and customer.

This study has two interlinked objectives. The main objective is to enrich the conceptualization of value creation in business interactions with the focus on those individuals that face the empirical reality of sales interactions that is to say, the salesperson and the customer. The study investigates the salespeople's attempts to create value in their everyday interactions, which are primarily those with the customer, but also with internal colleagues that relate to the customer interactions and constitute an important part of the salesperson's work. The supporting objective is to illustrate sales interactions as they are experienced and worked out by those individuals involved. The extensive material from shadowing salespeople in their work provides much insight into the practice of selling and salespeople's experiences in how they accomplish their activities.

*The purpose of this work is therefore to gain an enriched understanding of the activities and processes that bring about value in the salesperson-customer interaction of B2B relationships.*

Even though the study is based on the *salesperson's perspective on the sales interactions*, it is not about the salesperson's understanding and assumptions of value and value creation but about the activities and processes in interaction that seem to contribute to the construction of value in sales interactions. In the theoretical perspective of *Symbolic Interactionism (SI)* that I adopt in this study, individuals interpret the other's acts in interaction and reflect about their own situation to make ongoing adjustments to those with whom they interact (Blumer, 1969). The individual pursuing the own goal or intentions in interaction can influence but not determine the course and outcome of an interaction as it depends on the other's interpretation of the acts and his or her willingness to cooperate (Charon, 2007). Cooperation here is understood as allowing the other to achieve their separate goals by participating and contributing to the interaction (Charon, 2007). In the context of the study this means that while the salesperson might intend to create value for the customer, *he or she can only attempt to do so* as it ultimately depends on the customer's interpretation. Not only could customers resist or counteract any of the salesperson's efforts but they also shape the actions and outcome of the interactions together with the salesperson. And finally, while the salesperson might intend to create value for him- or herself, whether he or she succeeds depends on the customer's willingness to cooperate (Prus, 1989).

This work aims to complement the existing *discussions on value creation in business interactions* by an in-depth empirical, qualitative study that aims to discover those aspects that are usually overlooked by a company perspective on interactions (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a; Ford, 2011). Studying individuals from an interactive perspective provides different vantage points that encourage theory development for the area of value and value creation in business markets. The salesperson's everyday activities, problems and experiences in their attempt to create value in the different sales interactions serve to illustrate, in rich detail, the abstract construct of value creation and its complexity. The empirical setting thus supports the pursuit a richer understanding of the coming about of value in business interactions from the perspective of those individuals involved. Moreover, as a study of individuals, it can bring into focus the social processes underlying the construction of value in business interactions that are difficult to appraise with a company perspective. Building on the ethnographic methodology that is rarely used in the field of sales, it enables the deep understanding of the phenomena and enhances practical application of knowledge for practitioners. A manager facing the own reality in practice is promised to be in a better position when taking into account the insights of such an in-depth empirical account.

The study is a part of an emerging stream of studies in *B2B sales* that explores sales practices in a wider theoretical and methodological perspective than commonly used in sales research. Even though a growing body of literature acknowledges the changing content and boundaries of the sales work that accompany the ceasing existence of tangible products in B2B sales, studies investigating the salesperson's work in this context are very rare (Darr, 2006; Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010). Moreover, sales literature has been criticized for being too static and not sufficiently realistic, drawing a too simplistic picture of selling that does not sufficiently acknowledge the social individual, nor the interactive nature of sales (Plouffe & Barclay, 2007; Plouffe, Williams & Wachner, 2008). This study addresses these insufficiencies by illustrating sales interactions as they are experienced, interpreted and acted on by the individuals involved. By studying the interaction between the salesperson and the customer, this study hopefully contributes to a more realistic picture of selling.

# The Structure

The first part of Chapter 2 discusses the concept of value and value creation within the relevant B2B marketing literature. This leads into the second part of the chapter reviewing the equivalent research within the sales literature on these concepts and contextualizing the study within selling in non-standardized B2B markets. The chapter comprises the synthesis and problematization of the existing literature, thus providing the positioning of the study's contribution. In the review of the business marketing literature I contrast the recent developments in the field of research accepting the nature of value being interpretive and contextual with the dominant company perspective on the process of value creation, and elaborate on this incompatibility. The chapter concludes with highlighting that sales interactions are settings in practical reality in which one can assume value to be created, however not by one party for the other, but in the interpretative processes of the individuals involved in the interaction.

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the theoretical perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1938; Blumer, 1969) that I adopt in this work. In this perspective the individuals involved in interaction work out their lines of action with respect to one another, taking the other's interests into account, as the individual's intentions and goals are contingent on the other's willingness to cooperate and his or her interpretations in interaction. Through the exchange of symbols, such as language, the individuals can influence each other's symbolic realities and interpretations. In this chapter, I provide key insight into these main ideas of Symbolic Interactionism and elaborate on how I will use the ideas of social and symbolic interaction for the interpretation of value in sales interactions.

In the next chapter, Chapter 4, I address the methodological consequences of this theoretical perspective and give the reader a thorough insight into the research design that I created in the light of my purpose and my theoretical perspective. With the shadowing technique I believe that I have captured the actions and reactions in the many sales interactions of thirteen salespeople with their customers and internal colleagues. In addition, I elaborate on the treatment of the rich empirical data in greater depth. The coding and interpretive processes described in this chapter explain the reasoning behind the creation of the



following interpretive Chapters 6 through to 9. Before the reader is introduced to these chapters, Chapter 5 provides contextual knowledge of the case company setting and the thirteen protagonists of this study.

Chapters 6 through to 9 illustrate the empirically derived themes capturing the salesperson's activities in the attempt to create value for the customer and themselves. These value creation themes have been categorized based on the dimensions that seem to influence the course of the interaction between salesperson and customer, which are the customer's explicitness about goals and the salesperson's goals and intentions that become apparent in the interaction. In Chapter 6, the customers express what they want from the salesperson during the interaction and appear to have a clear idea about the outcome of the interaction, towards which they seem to direct the interaction with the salesperson aligning their acts. In Chapter 7, the customers define their situation as problematic and ask salespeople to help them to improve their situation, but the salesperson seems to be the one who directs the interaction into what he or she interprets to be an improved situation. In Chapter 7, salespeople's acts do not seem to align with any obvious customer goals, but from reactions in previous interactions with the customers, the salespeople act in accordance with experience and imagination of what the customer values when reducing the workload for them. Finally, Chapter 9 treats the internal interactions, which are an inherent part of the salesperson's work. In these interactions, the salesperson acts in the light of what they imagine to be valuable for the customer, which is assuring that they get what they want also through the other interactions with internal colleagues. At the end of each of the four chapters, I discuss how these interactions could be interpreted with regard to the salesperson's value and support the claims with empirical examples as well (satisfying customer, defining customer problems, keeping up the helper image, differentiating, securing customer relationship).

In Chapter 10, I draw on the empirical details in the previous chapters and discuss the social and symbolic processes that provide a more general illustration of the salesperson's attempts to create value in sales interactions. I restate value creation as making interactions valuable as it involves the process of evaluation and influence by those individuals involved in interaction. From the salesperson's perspective I discuss this evaluation process where the salesperson either interprets customer value based on their acts and reactions, assumes it from previous interactions or imagines it from their perspective. Moreover, the

salesperson influences this evaluation process by pursuing customer goals, decreasing uncertainty and increasing security. Finally, in Chapter 11, I pinpoint two main conclusions that I derive from this work that are the importance of the individuals' personal situation in their value judgment and the centrality of their acts in influencing it. I conclude by relating the alternative conceptualization of value creation in business marketing developed in this work to the existing literature, elaborating on the contributions for the B2B marketing literature, sales literature and methodology and closing with managerial implications and suggestions for future research.



# Chapter Two - Value Discussion in B2B Marketing

Value is considered as one of the initial and most crucial concepts in the field of marketing (Alderson, 1957; Holbrook, 1994; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Slater, 1997; Woodruff, 1997; Anderson & Narus, 1998). Since it is evidently not exclusive to the field of marketing, nor does it originate here, marketing researchers have usually referred to other disciplines for their conceptualization. In business marketing (B2B), the context of my study, renewed attention has been given to the discussions and conceptualizations of the value concept in the last decade (Ulaga, 2003; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005; Eggert et al., 2006; Grönroos, 2006; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Ford, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2011; Haas et al., 2012; Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant & Morgan, 2012).

While in the first part of this chapter I discuss and problematize those literature streams that address the concept of value in the field of business marketing at large, I narrow my focus continuously throughout the chapter to consider the research that addresses value creation in business interactions and finally examine value creation in salesperson-customer relationships. This structure highlights *my argument that as researchers we need to investigate interactions between the individuals involved in business relationships if we want to understand how value comes about in a business setting*. While I hope to convincingly substantiate this argument in my review of the literature, I also try to show that very few studies have taken on this perspective. To pursue this promising research endeavor this chapter pinpoints the discussions and audiences that this study aims to address and enrich with its contributions.

# The Value Concept

There have been two major developments in the conceptualization of value in business marketing. The first development is that discussions have shifted from taking a supplier perspective (Woodruff & Flint, 2006) on value, to a buyer's perspective (Woodruff & Flint, 2006), to the most popular take on value today, a supplier-buyer (Ulaga, 2001) or interaction-based perspective (Haas et al., 2012). The most prominent definition of value taking a *supplier perspective* is the value-added concept. In this notion value is something '*created, originally owned, and offered for sales by the seller*' (Woodruff & Flint, 2006:184). Hence, value in this perspective is understood as being inherent in the product or service attributes that the seller can add-on, independent from customers' perceptions. The second conceptualization of value from a seller's perspective is customer profitability (Reichheld & Sasser Jr., 1990; Storbacka, Strandvik & Grönroos, 1994; Reichheld, 1996) or CRM (Payne & Holt, 2001; Ryals & Rogers, 2006; Davies & Ryals, 2010; Maklan, Knox & Peppard, 2011) that consider the customer's value for the company (profitability). The idea is to extract more value from existing customers by gathering knowledge about them and segmenting them according to their value. The ideal customers that enable the supplier to gain value, are probably those that are loyal, that respond to cross selling, take less time, spread word-of-mouth and are less price sensitive (Miles, 1961).

The research taking the *buyer's perspective* has defined value as the economic worth of a seller's product/service offerings to customers. This evaluation is made by the customer based on a trade-off between perceived benefits and costs of the product (Zeithaml, 1988; Slater, 1997; Neap & Celik, 1999; Doyle, 2000), the offering (Anderson & Narus, 1998; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001) or the relationship (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005). Finally, the most prominent understanding of value in the last decade is the *supplier-buyer or interaction-based perspective* of value. This understanding has become most known as the concept of value co-creation (Ramírez, 1999; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Grönroos, 2006; Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008). The discussions of value co-creation differ between those researchers who understand it as co-production (Ramírez, 1999; Grönroos, 2006; Payne et al., 2008), and those who consider value co-creation as '*customer-determined co-created benefit*' (Vargo, 2008:212). The former refer to a

normative idea that customer companies are involved in the firm offering through resource integration, while the latter describe the genuinely collaborative nature of value creation. It is not optional and it does not require the customer to participate in the offering, but instead for customer value to be created the customer needs to perceive it (Vargo, 2008).

This leads to the second major development that is the change from a *more objectively given notion of value* (Lapierre, 2000; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Ulaga, 2003; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005; Eggert et al., 2006) to one that is *idiosyncratic, interpretive and contextual* (Woodruff & Flint, 2006; Vargo, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a; Edvardsson et al., 2011). It might be controversial to refer to it as a development since it is not so much a commonly shared understanding of value within the B2B research community than an ongoing discussion among some researchers that have integrated an interpretive perspective into the B2B value discussions, which has already been much more common in consumer marketing literature (Holbrook, 1994). The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group and the service-dominant logic (SDL) have influenced and developed the notion of value being interpreted (IMP) (Ford, 2011) or 'phenomenologically determined' (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a) and have inspired researchers more recently to continue establishing this path in B2B marketing literature (Ballantyne, 2004, 2006; Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Edvardsson et al., 2011; Haas et al., 2012).

Researchers have argued that this interaction-based perspective of value that usually goes along with the definition of value being idiosyncratic, interpretive and contextual has far-reaching consequences for the value discussions in business marketing, which have only started to be discussed (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Edvardsson et al., 2011; Haas et al., 2012). This goes beyond considering intangible and tangible aspects of value (Baxter & Matear, 2004), or 'hard' and 'soft' dimensions but instead applies an interpretive lens to the discussion on value in business markets (Helkkula, Kelleher & Philström, 2012) to better understand the complexity of the many ways those involved in business interactions interpret value. While the interpretive lens of this thesis is discussed in the following Chapter 3, I will elaborate on the notion of value being interpretive, contextual and interactive in more detail. I believe the before mentioned idiosyncratic characteristic of value to be embraced by these three descriptive terms.

## Value as interpretive

One of the main discussions across the studies of value in business marketing is concerned with the ontology of value, asking the question of where value occurs. In answering this question the literature discusses whether value is embedded in a product or offering as such, or if it lies purely in the perception of an individual.

Already Aristotle, Karl Marx and Adam Smith, among others, have discussed the crucial concept of value and identified two dimensions, exchange value (value-in-exchange) and use value (value-in-use). The former is defined as an indirect (Menger, 1976) and objective value (Smart, 1891), as well as the power of an exchange object to purchase other goods (Adam Smith in Vargo, 2007) or as the amount the consumer actually pays, representing revenue to a value system (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000; Priem, 2007). The latter is considered as a direct (Menger, 1976) and subjective value (Smart, 1891), the subjective valuation of consumption benefits by a consumer (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000; Priem, 2007) or the perceived utility of an exchange object (Adam Smith in Vargo, 2007). Thus, these dimensions describe a value that lies in the exchange object (McKnight, 1994) and one that lies in the perception of the use of an exchange object (Smart, 1891).

The notion that value can be embedded or inherent in the properties and qualities of a product (Miles, 1961; Levitt, 1969; Payne & Holt, 2001) or that products are value-laden has received much resistance from researchers who consider value to be subjectively determined in the interaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Priem, 2007; Grönroos, 2008; Ford, 2011). A popular way, however, to handle the value concept in business marketing literature is to not necessarily deny the subjectivity of value but to try to grasp it by giving it an objective character. Consider for example the popular value definition of Anderson and Narus:

'The worth in monetary terms of the technical, economic, service, and social benefits a customer company receives in exchange for the price it pays for a market offering (taking into consideration the available alternative suppliers' offerings and prices).' (1998:54)

Even though a monetary worth is still subjective since a monetary amount is different for every individual relative to its situation, the definition suggests an objective dimension by making it somewhat comparable. The definition does not deny the idea of value being a subjective judgment since a worth still requires someone to determine this worth, to evaluate, through some form of judgment. However, defining value in primarily monetary terms, as is rather common in the mainstream business marketing literature (e.g. Webster, 1991; Anderson & Narus, 1998; Anderson et al., 2007; 2009), is problematic. Firstly, because it creates the illusion that individuals are always able to translate their perceptions and emotions into monetary terms. Secondly, it limits the concept since individuals might value things that are not economic products or services (Richins, 1994). And thirdly, they might not think of value in monetary terms (Richins, 1994). While it is evidently of managerial relevance to find ways to 'monetize' things, hence put a price tag to something that is perceived as valuable, it seems to be a rather narrow and insufficient understanding of value, also for business markets.

Similarly problematic is the today still dominant definition in business marketing of perceived customer value as trade-off (De Chernatory, Harris & Dall'Olmo, 2000). This definition entails the assumption that value is a perception that derives from rational evaluation between benefits and costs or received and given (Zeithaml, 1988). The benefits are described either as utility (Zeithaml, 1988), as product characteristics such as performance, design, quality image (Doyle, 2000), or as more general technical, economic, service, and social benefits (Wilson & Jantrania, 1994; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Biong & Selnes, 1997; Flint, Woodruff & Gardial, 1997; Anderson & Narus, 1998). The costs or sacrifices are usually the price of purchase but also any other costs that the customer has in order to get the benefits. Whereas initially the trade-off definition has been used to describe the value of a product or offering (Zeithaml, 1988; Slater, 1997; Neap & Celik, 1999; Doyle, 2000; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001), it has also been used to describe the concept of relationship value (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Walter et al., 2001; Ulaga, 2003; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005).

The main problem is that while this conceptualization seems to accept the subjectivity of value, it neglects the notion that value changes over the course of time (Flint & Woodruff, 2001; Flint, Woodruff & Gardial, 2002; Möller & Törrönen, 2003), and could be less rational, for example in the form of a feeling of preference or experience (Holbrook, 1994).



The service-dominant logic and the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group have introduced the notion of value as meaning-laden (Ballantyne, 2006; Vargo, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a; Edvardsson et al., 2011; Ford, 2011). Lusch and Vargo (2006) have defined value as '*phenomenologically perceived by the beneficiary*' (Lusch, Vargo & Wessels, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). And the IMP tradition considers it as something interpretive:

'Thus the value to each participant from an interaction episode (...) is not a characteristic of what is involved in it, whether offering, payment or performance. Instead, the value to each actor of an interaction episode is that actor's interpretation of how the episode relates to the specific problems that it is addressing at that particular point in time.' (Ford, 2011:5-6)

If most researchers agree that value is interpreted and not inherent in a product or offering the consequential question is, what it is that is interpreted to be valuable. Here, the definitions differ, some researchers argue that value is *what these product attributes symbolize for the individual* (Prus, 1989; Flint et al., 1997; Woodruff, 1997), other researchers consider the activities to be evaluated, whether they are leading to the solving of a particular problem (Ford, 2011), the serving of the individual's needs in that moment (Ballantyne, 2006). While these researchers either refer to a physical product or activities in general to be the subject of interpretation, they agree over value being dynamic. Hence, an interpretation does not only change depending on what it refers to but also when it happens.

## Value as contextual

In line with the notion that value is interpretive is the claim that it is contextual (Lusch et al., 2008; Edvardsson et al., 2011). The meaning of something always relates to the *relative situation* of the one interpreting the situation. While many early conceptualizations of value do not specify when the value is accomplished, the underlying assumption of many seems to be the point of purchase (Zeithaml, 1988; Slater, 1997; Anderson & Narus, 1998; Neap & Celik, 1999; Doyle, 2000). In criticizing this conceptualization for the context of evaluation, the researchers have proposed the *use-situation*. The idea that the customer values lie in the use-situation has been embraced by researchers who take a more objective position towards value (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001) and those that take on the notion of value being interpretive (Holbrook, 1994; Flint et al., 1997;

Woodruff, 1997; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). The service-dominant logic states that '*... there is no value until an offering is used – experience and perception are essential to value determination.*' (Vargo et al., 2008:148)

Hence, the service-dominant logic has conceptualized the use-situation as context for determining value, hence the value of an object is determined by the meaning that an individual assigns to it when using it (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The notion that value only exists in customer use-situations has however been criticized (Möller, 2008), especially since use-situations are very difficult to define in B2B interactions. As an answer Vargo (2008) has introduced the concept of value-in-context to be a better reflection of value always being '*uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary*' (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). What they mean with value-in-context is that each actor has its own network with public, private and market-facing service providers in which the contact form is only one actor, hence Vargo proposes value to be understood in a larger '*value-configuration space*' (2008:213). Edvardsson (2011) argues for a social constructivist perspective on value-in-context as value-in-social-context since value depends on the relative position of the individual within the wider social context. Hence, value has a collective or intersubjective dimension. Since individuals are involved in the construction of their meanings, and depending on the situation, sometimes the collective social force will play a more dominant role and other times the individual needs and situation will exert a stronger influence (Edvardsson et al., 2011). While it is certainly true that the actor's own network, or the individual's social context, plays a role in the interpretation of value, these ideas take it as far as 'moving' the meaning process out of the interaction as promoted by the customer-dominant logic (Heinonen, Strandvik, Mickelsson, Edvardsson, Sundström & Andersson, 2010).

The alternative conceptualization that criticizes the notion that value can only occur at the point of exchange is the concept of relationship value, which entails that value can come about within and throughout a relationship (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Grönroos, 2000). The researchers argue that it is created through the interrelated activities of the buyer and supplier; in other words, the value is conceived through the relationship itself (Möller & Törrönen, 2003). Thus, the relationship or interaction itself influences the value perception at any point in time during the relationship (Ballantyne, 2006) and the value perceptions can change during the interaction or relationship (Ulaga, 2003b; Eggert et al., 2006; Möller, 2008). While these researchers do not particularly

support the interpretive notion of value, the IMP tradition promotes the idea that basically any interaction will contribute in some way, more or less, to solving the problems of the actors involved. In that case those involved could consider any activity in the interaction as more or less valuable. Since the interaction is somewhat boundary-less, value could be realized by either party any time, during a meeting, before, after, etc., and it could refer to any situation or an overall perception of happenings over time:

‘An IMP view would start with the idea that all episodes of business interaction of whatever form (meetings, whether productive or not; deliveries, whether on time or not; contracts, whether implemented or not; payments, whether complete or not; adaptations, investments and developments, whether as expected or deficient) will have a particular meaning for all those involved and may contribute more or less to coping with particular problems.’ (Ford, 2011:5)

Hence, this stream of literature argues that all business interactions are more or less meaningful for the actors involved with regard to the solving of their problems. But since problems can only be solved through interaction with other actors, the interaction is necessary for value to be interpreted. Together with the notion that the context of value is the interaction, is the idea within IMP that value is *‘reciprocal and concerned with the particular, but separate value to each of those involved in interaction’* (Ford, 2011:235). Hence, both actors in a dyad are involved in coping with the problems of the counterpart but interpret the interaction with regard to how it relates to their own specific problem. The notion of value for everyone involved in the interaction could appear idealistic in that it believes each party to get some value out of any interaction. However, it is important to consider that each party cannot only act opportunistically but also has to consider the value of the other party in the interaction in order to continue the interaction over time. Especially in business markets, it is not only the supplier that thinks about how to create value for the customer, but increasingly also the customers have a notion of what the suppliers value, the concept of customer attractiveness becomes more relevant. Hence, both parties are involved and are part of enabling own value as well as the value for the other.

# Value Created in Business Interaction

While both streams, the service logics (service-dominant logic and service logic) within the service marketing literature and the IMP tradition, argue for value being interpretive and contextual, the difference is that the former refers the value to be interpreted with regard to the actor's use-situation or the own resource context while the IMP tradition relates the value interpretation to the actor's problem. Both research streams, however, argue strongly that *value is created* in interaction between businesses. Hence, both understand value creation to be of an *interactive nature*. While the service logics use the terminology of value and value co-creation and conceptualize it either as resource integration or service, the IMP tradition avoids the value terminology and rather uses problem solving as the equivalent (Ford, 2011) (see Appendix 1 for summary). Both take a company perspective considering two actors, hence businesses, to be involved in the value creation.

As a side note, I want to mention that the US tradition of industrial marketing is prominent in their discussions on value in business markets. It takes a managerial perspective of the process that consists of understanding, creating and delivering value for the customer (Anderson & Narus, 1998; Anderson et al., 2009). The supplier is seen as the main actor in value creation providing services and flexible market offerings. The market offering is ideally flexible so that it can be adapted with regard to the add-on services to the buyers' desires. This approach takes a strong supplier perspective creating customer value for a segment of buyers from a relatively pre-fixed set of services. These studies are considered to be organization-based as they see the organization as dependent on its environment and seeking to manipulate the latter (IMP, 1982). Since these discussions do not consider value creation to happen in interaction between businesses, this literature is not further investigated from this point.

## Resource integration

According to the goods-dominant logic, value is created by the provider and is distributed in the marketplace through the exchange of goods and money. From this perspective, the roles of producers and consumers are distinct, with value creation being understood as an intrinsic aspect of the role of the provider. In

contrast, according to the service-dominant logic (SDL), the roles of producers and consumers are less distinct. Value is considered to be co-created as a process of integrating and transforming resources (Lusch & Vargo, 2006): *'Value is always co-created, jointly and reciprocally, in interactions among providers and beneficiaries through the integration of resources and application of competences.'* (Vargo et al., 2008:146). Both parties are considered to be resource integrators (Vargo et al., 2008). In practice, this means that the supplier's offering must be integrated with other customer resources, for example when a manufacturer combines its car production processes with the customer's resources of economic income and driving skills. Often, resources from more than the two immediate parties, such as public resources, etc., are used (Lusch, Vargo & O'Brien, 2007).

The service logic (Grönroos, 2006) has developed somewhat parallelly, using a different argumentation for why business interactions are more service-like and a different analytical approach. Otherwise, the notion that value cannot be created from a supplier perspective and delivered in a one-directional approach, but that the customer is actually a major part in the value creation is the same. For the supplier this means that it needs to provide service in order to co-create value (Grönroos, 2008) not in the form of value-added services but as

*'... interactive process consisting of several sub-processes and resources supporting corresponding customer practices in a way that helps the customer create value in all its practices (operational efficiency), and through this ultimately has a value-creating impact on the customer's business process (business effectiveness).'*' (Grönroos, 2011:241)

The terminology of resource integration and the discussions in the service-dominant and especially the service logic suggest a company perspective, where the actors are businesses, rather than individuals. Ballantyne (2006) has tried working out more concrete insights that the abstract ideas of the service-dominant logic could provide. By discussing knowledge, he gives some indications for what the SDL ideas mean for the individual practitioners. He argues that knowledge can be co-produced through communicational interaction (an exchange) and co-created through a dialogical interaction that results in something new and unique. And he argues further, if both parties trust each other in the dialogue, *'the co-creation of knowledge might generate value in new ways'* (Ballantyne, 2006:344). More recently, researchers have taken a step further towards taking the individuals into account, suggesting discussing resources on the basis of value in a social context, which requires empirical

studies of value co-creation through the use of resources in different social contexts (Edvardsson et al., 2011).

As Lusch and Vargo propose, resource integration could embrace any activity of *'bringing something into the interaction'* (2006:283), for example skills and knowledge. If one was to consider resources as anything that the salesperson or customer brings into the interaction, for example knowledge or relationships, then resource integration could be suitable to describe value creation in the interaction between individuals as well. The problem, however, is that resource integration is broad enough to describe any interaction, as it lies in the very nature of interactions that resources are integrated. Hence, this definition does not provide any further indication as to when value comes about and when it does not. Grönroos (2011) adds the aspect of helping the customer to create value in the form of efficiency and effectiveness. As mentioned before, this is a company perspective on value and does not seem suitable or at least not sufficient to describe the value interpreted by individuals. Vargo and Lusch (2008a) would argue for value to come about when the customer phenomenologically perceives it (value-in-use), however, they do not provide insights as to what resource integration processes are perceived as valuable by those involved. Hence, the impression remains that while the SDL has encouraged the rethinking of value in business markets as interpretive and interactive, most of the discussions stay on a conceptual level, dwelling on the ontology and nature of value, giving little insight on the empirical reality of value creation processes between businesses (Achrol & Kotler, 2006; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2009), and even less so on the practical realities of the individuals involved.

## **Mutual problem solving**

The IMP Group is known for their notably empirical approach to research. While much more descriptive and less conceptual, the tradition also prefers the company as level of analysis. Although, the IMP research has started off with an interest in individuals where they conceptualized social aspects of an interaction such as trust, commitment and power (Håkansson & Östberg, 1975; Håkansson & Johanson, 1977), the tradition left this level of analysis a couple of decades ago and seems to never have found interest in returning to it (Valla & Salle, 1997; Brennan & Turnbull, 2002; Ford, 2011; Axelsson & Baraldi, 2013).

With the aim to conceptualize the complexity of business interactions the research stream has moved from a company to a network perspective and has consequently, despite the intensive empirical research, difficulties to provide insights with empirical applicability and managerial implications (Brennan & Turnbull, 2002; Ford & Håkansson, 2006b).

IMP considers the relationship or interaction as a necessary prerequisite for value creation to happen (Ford, 1980; IMP, 1982; Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Ford, 2002; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005). Without the interactions, companies would not be able to solve problems with the right combination and integration of resources (Ford, 2011). This view leads to the idea that it is not actors and acting that are at the heart of managing and understanding the process of business. Instead, the analysis and operation of business are concerned with the structure of relationships and interdependencies and the process of interaction, which define the actor itself. But IMP also challenges the possibility of one company to manage and control interactions with other actors. Even though interaction is considered as directed towards clearly identified counterparts, Håkansson and Waluszewski (2002) argue that

‘... as soon as a company’s means and goals are confronted with those of other companies, a more or less clearly defined negotiation procedure begins. Since any interaction between two companies has to lead to a solution that can create a mutually acceptable economic outcome for both parties, both are more or less prepared to adapt their original means and goals’ (2002:10).

Hence, the linear connection between means and goals of rationality is substituted by an interactive one (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002) and IMP wants to understand *‘interaction between individuals and companies acting purposefully but where the outcome is the result of a confrontation of different rationalities-logics’* (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002:11).

The IMP perspective, however, considers business relationships as beneficial for all actors involved in principle, firstly because continuity is favorable for knowledge exchange and innovation, secondly because adaptation can overcome undesired variety or create fruitful variety, and finally because social interaction entailing trust can deal with uncertainties, conflicts and crises (Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota & Waluszewski, 2009). Thanks to the relationship the exchanges between supplier and buyer become predictable and reassuring, since the actors have adapted to each other’s business operations, and the actors’

learning and adaptation in the relationship may result in new product or service solutions. Hence, the rationale of IMP is that relationships are established because they enable economic benefits, lower costs, higher profits and improve the organization's control of some part of its environment (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson & Snehota, 2003). This group argues that there are three aspects of an interaction or relationship that provide value, namely activity links, resource ties and actor bonds (IMP, 1982; Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995).

This research tradition has an important influence on the understanding of value as being interpretive and interactive. Besides the very explicit value conceptualization in the latest Ford article (2011), it is the characterization of business interactions that has brought along this notion. The idea of business interactions has been described by five concepts. Firstly, the concept of time highlights the interaction as process that is difficult to delimit, *'no matter when or where we look at interaction, what we see is the continuation of things from before'* (Ford & Håkansson, 2006a:7). Even though an interaction is not pre-determined by what has happened before it is still influenced by it. Secondly, interdependence is a consequence of interaction over time but also the context for a present interaction. A company's resources can only be transformed into capabilities and co-evolve thanks to the interaction with other actors (Ford & Håkansson, 2006a). The concept of relativity describes that actors behave differently with different counterparts, such as what is good in one situation is bad in another and what is good in the short-run might be bad in the long-run (Ford & Håkansson, 2006a). Fourthly, jointness, which explains the mutuality and reciprocity of interactions, highlights the importance of combined intentions as opposed to individual intentions. Interaction is always joint, whether it is explicit, against will or without knowing (Ford & Håkansson, 2006a). As already mentioned a service, product or solution is the outcome of the actions, reactions, ideas and requirements of each actor in interaction, and not the planned product of one single company (Ford & Håkansson, 2006a). Finally, subjective interpretation describes the phenomenology of interactions, that each actor interprets the action of the other and that interpretations are unlikely to be similar as they are based on the actor's bounded rationality (Cyert & March, 1963; Simon, 1972; Ford & Håkansson, 2006a).



Ford (2011) addresses value creation more directly, defining it as problem solving. The rationale is that while the parties in interaction move closer to the solving of their own problem, they each perceive some value from the interaction (Ford, 2011). Each actor enters an interaction for self-serving purposes that make them both get involved in attempts to cope with problems of counterparts or influencing their interpretation of those problems. Hence, an IMP perspective of value creation is that there is never only value for one party but there is value for any participant in an interaction.

'The IMP view is that each actor decides which of their own and counterparts' problems it seeks to address and when to do so; where within their relationships to seek coping; how to approach problems with counterparts; what abilities of counterparts they would seek to employ and how each problem coping should relate to their own, other problems and those of the counterpart.' (Ford, 2011:237)

All these decisions that the actors have to make highlight the uncertainties that are prominent in business interactions. Therefore, the IMP view on value is not only about how the actor contributes to the solving of the counterpart's problem but also about how the actor is *'dealing with and modifying the actor's uncertainties when addressing those problems'* (Ford, 2011:237). The uncertainties in business interactions have been conceptualized as:

'An actor's problem-uncertainty concerns the most appropriate way for it to cope with a particular problem, an actor's network-uncertainty concerns which relationship the actor should seek to address a particular problem and an actor's fulfillment-uncertainty centers on whether, when and at what cost a problem will actually be coped with.' (Ford, 2011:237)

The uncertainties of business actors evolve over time and usually decrease with the increase of experience in handling a problem or dealing with an actor (Ford, 2011). These uncertainties and therewith an actor's problem perception can be manipulated by the other actor in interaction, for example an actor could create a new problem in the interaction, for which this actor has better abilities to solve it (Håkansson & Johanson, 1977).

The reason why the IMP tradition prefers the term problem solving to value is that it argues value to be a normative term (Ford, 2011). Surely there is research in business marketing that adopts a rather normative approach to the discussion of value and value creation (Anderson & Narus, 1998; Anderson et al., 2009),

however, it is not in the nature of the terms that value is normative and problem solving is more descriptive but it is in the approach of the researcher towards it.

Nevertheless, problem solving is a useful way to think about value creation in business interactions as it gives a direction and indication as to when value is created, that is, when the individuals involved interpret the interaction as helping the coping of their problem. Moreover, the notion that the interpretation of the problem as well as the solving of it are influenced by the counterpart in the interaction captures the ideas of interaction elaborated above, that it is joint, relative, interdependent and subjectively interpreted.

Problematic, however, is the definition of value creation as problem solving when applied to the interaction of individuals in business. While problem solving is often a suitable description, it either limits value creation to problem situations or it needs to include a hugely comprehensive definition of what constitutes a problem. One example one could imagine in practice is an industrial salesperson who drops by one of his or her customers in order to keep up to date and maintain the relationship. This meeting could just of informational or social value to both parties without either party perceiving a problem that needs to be solved. Also the notion that the problem solving is mutual, that either party interprets value in getting closer to solving the own problem, seems difficult. If the salesperson solves a customer's problem by telling him or her what needs to be changed in the production process, the interaction indicates value for both parties, the customer's solved problem, but also the salesperson, for example in the form of customer trust or credibility. However, it seems arbitrary to describe this interaction, or one that ends in a payment by the customer, as the salesperson getting closer to solving a problem.

The reason for the concept's inability to describe the above-mentioned interactions might be that it takes the company perspective on interactions. And even though it could well describe some of the interactions between individuals in business, it seems too narrow to describe the variety of interactions that lie in the social interaction between seller and buyer.

# Problematizing B2B Marketing Literature

With the first part of the review I have attempted to elaborate the conceptualization of value in business marketing that considers it as, firstly, interpretive, and thereby individual and idiosyncratic to every person, secondly, it is also contextual and relative to the situation the individual is facing, and finally, it is interactive, as it is influenced by those people the individual interacts with and objects that he or she deals with.

In the second part, I concluded that those studies that have addressed value creation, whether conceptually or empirically, *have downplayed the role of the individual* (Valla & Salle, 1997; Brennan & Turnbull, 2002; Ford, 2011; Axelsson & Baraldi, 2013). Even if mutual problem solving (Ford, 2011) and resource integration (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo et al., 2008) are considered to describe value creation between businesses, there is no doubt that this resource integration and problem solving needs to ultimately be done by individuals communicating problems and solving them by connecting and integrating resources (Håkansson et al., 2009). While there is nothing generally wrong with a company perspective on value, it is difficult if not contradictory to conceptualize value, which is interpretive and contextual, from a *company perspective*. It misses out on the details, the ‘flesh-on-the-bone’, that explains how the individuals engaged in the day-to-day business interactions bring about and interpret value. The discussion on a system-level of analysis necessitates letting go of detail, detail that is crucial to understand the context and to be able to solve an empirical problem, such as trying to understand how individuals in business interactions bring about value. This missing individuality in analysis and recommendations might make them unfeasible or even irrelevant for the research subjects facing practical reality and it might obscure interrelationships that are important to understand in a wider context (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). The complexity of business interactions does not solely lie in the connectedness of different companies, in their structural dependencies and their inability to control the network of interactions (IMP, 1982). But, *creating value for the other participant in an interaction becomes complex* in the context of interpersonal interactions where people try to achieve their goals in their interaction with others, having to take their interests and their perspectives into account, trying to influence the other’s interpretations of the own acts but also

being influenced in the own acts by the acts of the other (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007).

And finally, I have intended to highlight the lack of in-depth empirical exploration of the activities around value in business marketing. Hence, related to the neglected role of the individual is the *insufficient understanding of the activities and processes that bring about value in the interaction between those individuals involved in business relationships*. A few studies have identified empirical dimensions of value, but these are only based on the benefit-cost trade-off conceptualization of value where the researchers have asked customers or suppliers about benefits or costs. Wilson and Jantrania (1994) identify in their study economic dimensions (investments quality, value engineering, concurrent engineering and cost reduction), strategic dimensions (core competencies, strategic fit, time-to-market and goals) and behavioral dimensions (social bonding, trust and culture). Walter, Ritter and Gemünden (2001) have empirically investigated the supplier's side of relationship value with its direct and indirect benefits from the interaction with the customer. The direct functions are monetary, such as profit and volume as well as the security of purchase (safeguard), and the indirect functions are innovation, market, scout and access. Focusing on the customer's perspective Gwinner, Gremmler and Bitner (1998) identify three categories of relational benefits, confidence, social and special treatment. Ulaga makes the first attempt to not only focus on the benefits but also include the costs in the eight relationship value drivers that he identifies (Ulaga, 2003). These are: product quality, service support, delivery, supplier know-how, time-to-market, personal interaction, direct product cost (price) and process costs. The problems of the trade-off model have been discussed before; at this point I only want to highlight the limited number of research exploring the concept of value and especially the activity of 'doing' value in the context-dependent, empirical reality (Payne & Holt, 2001; Ulaga, 2001; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005).

I want to sum up, suggesting that in order to understand how value is constructed in business interactions researchers need to explore *the empirical reality of those individuals involved in the activities and processes of the business interaction that attempt to create value*.

Therefore, I want to turn to the sales literature as I consider the interaction between a salesperson and customer contact still to be one of the most if not the most important link between businesses despite the fact that B2B interactions consist of several different linkages, e.g. production, design or product development, internal sales. In B2B non-standardized markets it is often the external salesperson who is involved and embedded in different departments and functions in order to maintain the customer relationship (Darr, 2006; Bradford, Brown, Ganesan, Hunter, Onyemah, Palmatier, Rouziès, Spiro, Sujan & Weitz, 2010). Having said that, I seek to find what insights the literature that deals with these sales interactions provides on value creation processes. While the conceptualizations of value in the sales literature are considered to be in their infancy (Terho et al., 2012), the importance of the sales function and the salesperson in value creation for businesses is unchallenged (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Anderson et al., 2007; Storbacka et al., 2009; Blocker et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2012).

## B2B Sales Interactions

With the following subchapters I want continue substantiating my argument in this study, as well as the need for it, investigating what is to be learned from the sales literature about how the individuals involved in the day-to-day sales encounters work out the interaction.

B2B selling typically involves multiple players of each party (Moon & Strong, 1994; Jackson, Widmier, Giacobbe & Keith, 1999; Jones et al., 2005), e.g. internal sales, production or marketing. Nevertheless, one external salesperson is often at least indirectly involved in most interactions. As the main contact between seller and buyer company, they manage the direct contacts and keep an overview of the indirect ones. Much of the sales literature focuses on this external salesperson. And so does this study. Selling is here considered to be all interactions of the external salesperson, those involving any customer contacts and those with the internal colleagues that relate to customer interactions or projects. Hence, it acknowledges the different interactions in B2B selling but it takes the external salesperson as the focal unit of analysis.

## Research on sales work

Traditionally, research on selling and sales force management has to a large extent treated selling as an order-producing function (Stewart, 2006; Storbacka et al., 2009). However, a growing body of literature maintains that the work of the B2B salesperson in the twenty-first century has changed and plays a more significant role in the organization (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Homburg, Workman Jr. & Jensen, 2000; Moncrief, Marshall & Lassk, 2006; Piercy, 2006; Sheth & Sharma, 2006). The discussed reasons for this development are among others increased customer expectations, increasing market turbulence and internal productivity pressures (Geiger & Guenzi, 2009), as well as the tendency to substitute standard sales activities with technology (Ingram, LaForge & Leigh, 2002; Buttle, Ang & Iriana, 2006; Sharma, 2007). Despite the importance of selling in the perception of most managers and an increasing number of sales researchers, the study of selling, the sales work, or the activity of selling is rare not only in business marketing and sales literature but also in social science studies of professions (Darr, 2006).

An overview of sales activities is provided by Moncrief et al. (2006) who have made the most recent effort to update the existing sales activity taxonomies (McMurray, 1961; Newton, 1973; Moncrief, 1986; Marshall, Moncrief & Lassk, 1999). Moncrief et al. (2006) argue that selling has become transformed from the previous decades towards a relationship orientation facilitated by technology. The researchers have identified 105 activities in the literature and asked sales employees across 15 different manufacturing industries to rate them according to the frequency with which they perform them. However, activities described in the relationship selling approach (Jolson, 1997; Williams, 1998; Boles, Brashear, Bellenger & Barksdale, 2000; Williams, Everett & Rogol, 2009), such as managing of customer information and knowledge, strategic thinking and planning, selling and negotiating internally and externally and the handling of many different contacts (Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Davies et al., 2010) are not considered in this study. Also the activities described for consultative sellers that are related to identifying improvement opportunities, calculation of monetary value and communication of value (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Liu, Leach & Crosby, 2001; Hanan, 2004) are not included. The problem of this study is that it has no explorative character but takes activities found in existing taxonomies and thus misses out on portraying a potential change in sales activities.

The alternatives to taxonomies that one can find in sales research are conceptualizations of selling as more or less sequential sales processes (Dubinsky, 1980; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). The third very popular approach in which selling has been investigated are quantitative studies that consider self-assessed or manager-assessed salesperson behaviors and characteristics such as adaptive selling (Weitz et al., 1986; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Franke & Park, 2006), customer-oriented selling (Saxe & Weitz, 1982; Schwepker Jr., 2003; Rozell, Pettijohn & Parker, 2004; Homburg, Müller & Klarmann, 2011) and relationship selling (Crosby et al., 1990; Wotruba, 1996; Jolson, 1997; Boles et al., 2000) in relation to performance. Whether it is taxonomies, processes or behavioral attributes, all these conceptualizations have *difficulty to capture the interactive nature of selling* as they only research the salesperson's (or the customer's) behavior and assume that the salesperson's intentional behavior is the same as the actual behavior in the interaction and is not shaped or influenced by the other part. For example, adaptive selling that one might mistake for a more interactive approach to selling considers the adaptation of the salesperson's presentation to certain characteristics of the customer but does not address dynamics in behaviors. The same is the case for customer-oriented selling research that asks salespeople or their managers whether they follow a certain set of general behaviors, for example 'I try to help customers achieve their goals' (Saxe & Weitz, 1982) or relationship selling studies that ask the customer about trust, co-operative intentions and disclosure (Crosby et al., 1990). What customer-orientation, however, really means in the concrete sales interactions is unclear.

The main reason for the failure in illustrating the complexity of selling is the *lack of diversity of methods* used in sales research (Plouffe & Barclay, 2007; Plouffe et al., 2008). The most popular survey method is too static to capture the diversity of different types of selling jobs involving different activities, varying according to customer, industry, offering. More comprehensive, qualitative studies that explore and discuss the salesperson's work in context, the activities - how they are shaped and come about in the different interactions that highlight the inherently interactive and social nature of selling - are very rare.

Some recent dissertations in marketing draw a more interactive picture of selling, one that is closer to a complex and inherently social reality of selling. These investigations use for example a grounded approach to understand the salesperson's customer knowledge that is embedded in the relationship and

cannot be dissected from it (Geiger, 2001), or to understand selling as a social process of '*business maneuvering*' whereby the involved actors resolve their main concern which is the conduct of effective business through the management of mutually dependent and complementary activities (Age, 2009). Another example is a qualitative in-depth case study approach developing a framework for strategic adaptation of the seller's process to match the buyer's buying process in a business-to-business context in order to make sales processes more relationship oriented (Viio, 2011).

Even within social studies, selling has received little attention from those researchers interested in work studies (Prus, 1989; Darr, 2006). Prus argues that scant consideration has been given to the '*actualities of marketplace activities, interactions and the relationships emerging therein*' (1989:30). Reasons for this lack of interest in sales work are the existing stereotypes of sales work as mundane commercial activities and exchanges (Prus, 1989), the preferences in investigating more prestigious work such as that of doctors or engineers (Darr, 2006), the minimal contact and familiarity of social scientists with these settings, their perception that business people are better equipped for this context and the perceived dissonance with their capitalist critical agenda (Prus, 1989), to mention a few. Those few sales work studies that exist investigate mostly personal selling situations such as car sales (Browne, 1973; Lawson, 2000), life insurance (Oakes, 1990; Leidner, 1993) and real estate (House, 1977) or standardized business-to-business sales situations such as pharmaceuticals (Lloyd & Newell, 2001). These studies have a particular focus on the rhetoric of sales interactions, the communication and sales techniques, and consider these under a very critical light. To take an example, Korczynski (2005) uses a quote from Marx about the industrial entrepreneur, as a comparison with the salesperson:

'He puts himself at the service of the other's most depraved fancies, plays the pimp between him and his need, excites in him morbid appetites, lies in wait for each of his weaknesses - all so that he can then demand the cash for this service of love.' (Marx, 1964)

A typical image of the salesperson promoted in these studies is that the salesperson 'enchants' the customer to make sales (Korczynski, 2005). The techniques aim to make the customer feel comfortable in that he or she thinks to be in control, to be important or to be right. In this way the salesperson shows orientation towards the customer and serves the customer's interests but still enables the own interests, which is according to that literature only the



monetary reward (Oakes, 1990). A more differentiated and comprehensive study of selling is the one of Prus (1989) who takes a symbolic interactionist perspective on sales interactions across retail, wholesale, manufacture and promotion settings. Besides his interest in the rhetoric influence process as in the studies above, he also provides a rich ethnographic account striving for generic concepts and features that characterize the selling process, for example, presenting products, generating trust, neutralizing resistance, obtaining commitment, developing loyalty and maintaining enthusiasm. The ethnographic study of Darr (2006) investigates a B2B non-standardized selling context of high-tech products. He investigates the changes he has observed in the sales work as a result of the shift from product to process in the customization process, the change from working with things to working with people. His main finding is the growing interdependence of social and technical skills in the work of the salesperson.

### **Selling in non-standardized B2B markets**

B2B selling could embrace sales of mass products (e.g. cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, etc.), complex technology or professional services. The context of this study, however, is manufacturing companies of mass products or commodities that move from product delivery to solutions, hence into services-based, service-dominant or non-standardized markets. The main characteristic is that there is no ready-made product for the customer prior to the sales interaction. This means that at the beginning of the sales interaction, the customer has no information about the product and service characteristics and the salesperson misses the knowledge about the customer's use or application of the solution (Darr, 2002). This lack of knowledge usually leads to greater interactivity and adaptability (Darr, 2006).

Hence, selling in this context is not usually limited to one interaction containing delivery and payment (the actual sale), nor is this interaction the end of a customer interaction. The more common picture is many sales interactions with the same customers stretching over a *longer time period* as part of a relationship. Through frequent and continuous interactions during product design phases or implementation, relationships between the salesperson and different customer contacts grow quite robust over time (Darr, 2006).

Moreover, the content of the interactions changes. Once the customer is an active part in the idea generation and development of a solution, the customer's influence needs to be continuously integrated in the design work and the production possibilities of the seller company. This means that all other functions and individuals are part of the sales process or the sales interactions. Thus, the salesperson is involved in processes and activities that go beyond what has been considered the traditional sales process (Jones, Brown, Zoltners & Weitz, 2005; Bradford et al., 2010; Terho et al., 2012). This might take the form of the salesperson taking along a designer to a customer meeting in order to gather some first concrete ideas of the design of the solution based on the direct feed-back from the customer. Hence, when selling becomes more *cross-functional* (Storbacka et al., 2009), the sales process also involves more *inner-organizational coordination* (Plouffe & Barclay, 2007; Sharma, 2007; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Plouffe, Sridharan & Barclay, 2010). The new concept of embedded sales force describes the centrality of the salesperson's interfaces not only to different contacts in the buying organization but also within the own organization (Bradford et al., 2010).

Darr (2006) highlights that the sales profession in non-standardized markets goes through an *elevation of skill level*, since the activities are of a broader nature and involve more technical tasks, greater technical knowledge is needed in the interactions. The salesperson does not only need to better understand the customer's culture, market environment and commercial outlook (Davies et al., 2010) but also to understand the customer's business processes in order to make any improvements (Anderson et al., 2007). The increasing (technical) skills of the sales force are not a necessary consequence of more complex products per se but rather the fact that the solution or outcome is unknown at the beginning of the interaction. Interestingly, Darr (2006) finds that selling in non-standardized markets involves more face-to-face meetings and requires more social or interactive skills than in standardized markets and therefore talks about up-skilling that involves increased technical skills, as well as social and interactive skills, that he considers as interwoven and equally important.

Finally as a side note, the preferred *control mechanism for salespeople* seems to be different. Most common in sales organizations are outcome control measures (Anderson & Oliver, 1987; Cravens, 1993; Anderson & Onyemah, 2006), which take the form of sales volume quotas, and a partly commission-based salary that is oriented at this quota. The salespeople are considered as

autonomous in that they are free to do the work in any way they wish as long as the outcome is satisfactory. The literature however argues that in the settings where companies move into services and solutions in order to get better margins, payment based on volume is detrimental to the desired behavior. Hence, outcome control based on profit or behavior-based control is suggested. Darr (2006) proposed the addition of a control dimension meaning the control through the customer, as he or she becomes the supervisor and evaluator of the work.

## **Value creation in B2B selling**

Besides some first academic studies investigating the value concept in the sales context (Blocker et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2012; Terho et al., 2012), this topic has mostly been addressed in practitioner literature in the form of increasing the customer's productivity and profitability (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Hanan, 2004; Kaario et al., 2004; Anderson et al., 2007). The following sales approaches or strategies that will be discussed have a more direct relation to the concept of customer value, rather than only measuring dimensions of it (Terho et al., 2012), and even if they are not true to all consequences of an interactive notion of selling, they consider the customer as the starting point for the sales approach (see Table 1).

### *Relationship management*

The concept of relationship selling as presented before has been further developed into the notion of relationship management, which highlights the salespeople's long-term, strategic orientation and the necessity to manage processes and individuals. In a sales organization a relationship manager describes people *'who are responsible for marshaling and coordinating their firm's resources to provide innovative offerings with long-term implications for their customers and their firms'* (Bradford et al., 2010:241). The role of building and maintaining relationships has been found to entail managing customer information and knowledge, strategic thinking and planning, selling and negotiating internally and externally and the handling of many different contacts (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Davies et al., 2010).

Table 1

Sales approaches including the value concept

Selling approaches	Definition	Salesperson activities/behaviors
Relationship selling/ management	‘Focuses on the building of mutual trust within the buyer/ seller dyad with a delivery of <i>anticipated, long-term, value-added benefits to buyers.</i> ’ (Jolson, 1997:76)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-operative intentions</li> <li>• Mutual disclosure</li> <li>• Intensive follow-up</li> </ul>
Consultative selling	‘The process of professionally providing information for <i>helping customers take intelligent actions to achieve their business objectives.</i> ’ (Liu, Leach & Crosby, 2001:2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and solve customer problems</li> <li>• Communicate knowledge</li> <li>• Communicate with internal and external customers</li> </ul>
Solution selling	‘A set of customer–supplier relational processes (...) all of which are aimed at <i>meeting customers’ business needs.</i> ’ (Tuli et al., 2007:1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer requirements definition</li> <li>• Customization and integration of goods and/or services and their deployment</li> <li>• Post deployment customer support</li> </ul>
Value (-based) selling	‘Understanding and <i>improving the customer’s business</i> in a proactive manner.’ (Töytäri et al., 2011:494)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand customer business</li> <li>• Position own offering/craft value proposition</li> <li>• Communicate value (quantify impact; negotiate, offer and deliver),</li> <li>• Verify and document impact</li> </ul>

In a market context, the relationship manager has even been considered as a market shaper through actively establishing relationships and interactions with customers (Geiger & Finch, 2009). The key account management (KAM) research stream within sales literature (e.g. Homburg, Workman Jr. & Jensen, 2002; Spencer, 2004; Jones, Dixon, Chonko & Cannon, 2005; Ryals & Rogers, 2006; Guenzi, Pardo & Georges, 2007; Guenzi, Georges & Pardo, 2009; Ivens, Pardo, Salle & Cova, 2009; Richards & Jones, 2009) has addressed salespeople who manage important customer relationships. These have often a distinct position and thus higher status in the company compared to the ‘normal’ account manager that covers all customers in a specific geographic region. Recently, researchers have encouraged the thought that most salespeople could be seen as relationship managers, independent of their exact job position (Davies et al., 2010).

Managing relationships as a way to create value for the customer is based on the *concept of relationship value* that is the value created through the interrelated activities of the buyer and supplier (Möller & Törrönen, 2003). Relationship value also embraces less tangible, or objectively accountable, values such as trust (IMP, 1982; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005; Eggert et al., 2006; Möller, 2006). The above-mentioned activities of managing customer relationships and different contacts are activities that rather portray the value that the salesperson creates for the own company by maintaining the customer’s relationship. Hence, what the literature on this approach does not provide are the activities and processes that explain how salespeople work to accomplish customer value, for example how they try to create trust.

### *Consultative selling*

Consultative selling understands salespeople as advisors who integrate their knowledge in order to provide value to customers, for example in the form of value-added customized solutions (Liu et al., 2001). Consultative sellers create value for their customers by problem solving and acting internally as a customer advocate (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999). The process often starts with some problem that the customer has encountered but not necessarily clearly identified. The general task of the salesperson is to create value by understanding the customer’s problem, considering his or her micro and macro environment, and creating a solution to the problem (Grewal & Sharma, 1991; Rackham &

DeVincentis, 1999; Sharma, Krishnan & Grewal, 2001; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Bonney & Williams, 2009).

It is evident that just as for value and solution selling, the demand on the salespeople's cognitive, communicative and managerial abilities increases (Liu et al., 2001) since they need to analyze a (technical) problem and calculate a monetary or financial value for its improvement. The salesperson needs the technical knowledge, but also the market knowledge in order to understand the customer's problem and have the social skills to communicate externally and internally (Tyler, 1990; Liu et al., 2001). Unfortunately there is not much discussion on the activities of finding, analyzing or solving the problem because ultimately, consultative selling could mean that salespeople do not only involve the companies' own products any more, but might even combine different products/services (Sawhney, 2006; Sharma, 2007; Sheth & Sharma, 2008). The dominant value notion underlying this approach is *monetary conceptualization* of value, in the form of customer *business improvement*, which increases profitability.

### *Solution selling*

The marketing and selling of solutions combine physical products or services and knowledge to address the prior identified problem (Windahl, Andersson, Berggren & Nehler, 2004). Tuli et al. (2007) propose that the solution-selling process is a set of relational processes comprising, customer requirements definition, customization and integration of goods and/or services and their deployment, and post-deployment customer support. Also the solution-selling process entails the initial problem recognition that requires an in-depth knowledge of the customer's processes and business (Windahl & Lakemond, 2006) and the finding of an appropriate solution (Tuli et al., 2007). The in-depth knowledge that the salesperson needs in order to find problem and solution, requires not only close work together with the customer and therewith a customer centric orientation but also a good cooperation between the salesperson and the back-end personnel (Tuli et al., 2007). With regard to the creation of this solution, the individual supplier needs to align and manage different resources and interfaces of the customer and the own organization and integrate them into one solution that solves the customer's idiosyncratic customer problem (Oliva & Kallenberg, 2003; Tuli et al., 2007).

Just as with the notion behind consultative selling, solution selling demands the salesperson to be a customer expert rather than a product expert. The difference is that implementation (i.e. resource management) is seen as part of the salesperson's responsibilities. By creating a total system the supplier aims to save the customer the effort to combine products, spare parts and support services in the most efficient and appropriate way. Thus, one could argue that the exchange complexity for the customer and the need for the customer's resource decrease, eventually leading to a *monetary value*.

### *Value (-based) selling*

More recently, the concept of value-based selling seems to somewhat combine ideas from consultative and solution selling, however with more focus on the communication of value. The salesperson should seek to create *monetary value* by making the customer's business more efficient or effective (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Hanan, 2004; Anderson et al., 2007), hence either decrease the cost or increase the benefits of the customer's production (Rose, 1991; Anderson et al., 2007). In order to sell value, the salesperson needs to have a good understanding of the customer's business model, including its goals and processes, as well as the customer's customer (Anderson et al., 2007; Terho et al., 2012). Selling value embraces apart from identifying the opportunities for monetary value creation, the drafting of value propositions, communicating the value and capturing it later on through a value-based price (Kaario et al., 2004; Anderson et al., 2007; Töytäri et al., 2011; Terho et al., 2012).

Understanding the customer's business means to know the goals and strategies of the customer, the customer's production processes and even to understand the customer's customer (Rose, 1991; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Hanan, 2004). Gaining this knowledge is considered the most crucial precondition to be able to accomplish value selling, and it is the most challenging, as it requires involvement of the customer. Hence, for value selling it is necessary that the buyer is willing to partner and see value in the relationship (Kaario et al., 2004). In order to communicate value, the salesperson needs to quantify the value created for the customer (Anderson et al., 2007; Töytäri et al., 2011). This requires customer information and salesperson experience and can be enriched by market studies or information systems (Kaario et al., 2004; Terho et al., 2012). The value proposition is formulated by comparing the product with the customer's next best alternative and identifying the most significant point of

difference in terms of customer value (Anderson et al., 2007). This approach to value communication is considered crucial in order to achieve the credibility and persuasiveness that is necessary to capture value (Anderson et al., 2007; Terho et al., 2012).

While sales literature in general seems to consider value capture or appropriation as an inner-organizational issue that falls into the general marketing or strategy literature, the value-selling concept addresses value capture as a responsibility of the salesperson. This responsibility entails mostly the salesperson's involvement in setting a value-based price, as the salesperson has the knowledge about the customer and is likely to have the best notion of the customer's value perception and willingness to pay. Even though, value capture also depends on the company (strategy, costs) and the market (competition), the salesperson is in the best position to see the imbalance between value creation and appropriation and correct it, for example, by changing the resource allocation and prioritization (decrease relationship costs) or change the price (Blocker et al., 2012). There are evidently other values for the supplier company besides a higher price, such as, knowledge (Walter et al., 2001), but these are not considered in the value-selling concept.

### *Salesperson's role in value creation*

The importance of the salesperson for businesses to create value has always been underscored: These people are in the prominent position to understand the customer's needs and drivers of satisfaction and value (Homburg, Wieseke & Bornemann, 2009), to communicate the value propositions to the customer (Anderson et al., 2007) and to feed the insights back into the own company (Blocker et al., 2012). More recent literature discusses why the salesperson's role in the company's value creation, that is, the value creation for the customer and the value capture, has changed and become more important (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Sharma et al., 2008; Bradford et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2010; Blocker et al., 2012). Sales researchers have argued that the salesperson moves from being only the transmitter of value inherent in a product to being an active part in the shaping and creating of customer value (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Leigh & Marshall, 2001; Terho et al., 2012). Salespeople must engage in more active relational processes where customers and suppliers together learn, have a dialogue, identify and act on value creation opportunities (Payne et al., 2008; Blocker et al., 2012).



In line with the sales approaches described above, researchers have mostly discussed two main aspects in the value creation role of the salesperson that is, firstly, the more active and creative work in problem identification and solving (Windahl & Lakemond, 2006; Tuli et al., 2007; Terho et al., 2012) or business improvements (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Anderson et al., 2007) as an expert or consultant (Ingram, LaForge, Avila, Schwegler & Williams, 2008). Secondly, the managing of linkages and people to a greater extent (Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Tuli et al., 2007; Bradford et al., 2010) or, more generally, managing, aligning and integrating resources, e.g. information across functions (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Tuli et al., 2007; Davies et al., 2010; Blocker et al., 2012) as strategic orchestrator or broker (Ingram et al., 2008). This requires salespeople to become more interconnected (Darr, 2006) or embedded (Bradford et al., 2010).

While the value creation for the customer should ideally lead to a value for the supplier company, there are also some aspects where the salesperson creates more directly value for the own company. As discussed in the relationship management approach, nurturing the customer relationship creates an obvious value for the seller company since the salesperson builds not only a personal relationship with the customer but also a reputation of the company and a relationship with it. Moreover the salesperson fulfills a marked research and feedback function for the supplier company (Ingram et al., 2008; Blocker et al., 2012). Managers seem to find different ways to try to capitalize on the knowledge that the salesperson has through the relationship with the customer by means of, for example, reporting systems. Besides the relationship and the customer knowledge, the third and mostly addressed issue is the salesperson's role as revenue producer for the company through sales. This aspect is more recently also discussed concerning the salesperson's involvement in trying to capture the monetary value created for the customer at a better price (Hinterhuber, 2004; Anderson et al., 2007; Hinterhuber, 2008).

# Problematizing Sales Literature

Those researchers who have started to engage in the discussion of value in the context of selling claim the immaturity of these discussions and the necessity to engage in them in order to better understand the salesperson's activities in value creation as an interactive process (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010; Blocker et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2012; Terho et al., 2012).

I consider the studies discussing value creation in selling to be insufficient as they all have an *underlying objective conceptualization of value* despite the focus on the individual salesperson. The improvement of the business through increased efficiency or effectiveness, which ultimately brings about monetary or financial value, could be described as systemic values. Whether it is through solution selling, consultation or most explicit through value-based selling, the idea is that the salesperson should improve the efficiency or effectiveness of the customer (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Kaario et al., 2004; Anderson et al., 2007; Töytäri et al., 2011). Evidently money is of exceptional importance in economic exchanges, however, researchers fall short on providing an understanding of a major part of market exchanges if they only consider the monetary dimension. Surely, some individuals interpret an increase in efficiency or effectiveness of the business as value, for example the owners of the company or those that have rewards linked to these measures. However, assuming that this captures the variety of values that could emerge in sales interactions between individuals is unacceptable.

The other observation is that while the value of the salesperson for the supplier company is often considered, the salesperson's value itself is not discussed. Sales research often does the salespeople a disservice when it makes the control and reward system one of its main topics. Surely, the salesperson is motivated by money, just as other employees. However, there seems to be much more that the salesperson could 'get out of' the interaction with the customer than money. What about pride, self-assurance, security, for example?

One reason why the social, non-economic, or more specifically social value aspects of value are not considered in sales research is that the literature is lacking cross-fertilization with the value discussions (Haas et al., 2012; Terho et al., 2012). Another one is that sales research tends to portray selling in a

simplistic one-way exchange and does not acknowledge the salesperson as a social individual (Williams & Plouffe, 2007; Plouffe et al., 2008). Even if the existing literature would not deny that selling is interactive, it does not consider the salesperson's actions as influencing and being influenced by the customer. Instead it considers a one-directional or one-sided approach of the salesperson being able to do whatever he or she intends to do independent from the individual customer's actions and reactions. Hence, while focusing on the salespeople as such, their characteristics or skills, it lacks the understanding of their interactions with customers and colleagues as a major part of their work. Moreover, it considers the development and outcome of an interaction to be in the salesperson's control, a perspective that is neither convincing, considering the behavioral interdependencies in interactions (Blumer, 1969; Ford & Håkansson, 2006a), nor is it close to practical reality. To sum up, *while sales research argues that value is created in sales interactions, it fails to acknowledge and credit the interactive and social nature of selling* (Williams & Plouffe, 2007; Plouffe, Sridharan & Barclay, 2010).

One study that brings the characteristics of interactions developed by the IMP tradition into the sales context is the one by Haas et al. (2012). By integrating these notions into the value literature and the sales context, the study enables a broader conceptualization of value beyond monetary or financial value. In a conceptual effort the authors identify four features of value creation processes in sales, which are jointness, balanced initiative, interacted value, and socio-cognitive construction. They support these with empirical material deriving some implications for the salesperson's tasks. While this study is an important step in the right direction, it makes assumptions about the value creation processes in sales that cannot be sufficiently confirmed yet because of the lack of investigations in empirical reality.

The purpose of Chapter 2 has been to discuss and criticize the relevant literature streams in order to substantiate the relevance of my study and to position it. More specifically, I lean on the discussed literature streams firstly, to argue for the nature of value to be interpretive, contextual and interactive and secondly, to conceptualize the everyday sales interactions as incidents of value creation (e.g. Anderson et al., 2007; Blocker et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2012; Terho et al., 2012). While I assume salespeople to intend to create value as participants in a sales interaction, the salesperson can only attempt to do so since the accomplishment is conditioned by the customer's interpretations and actions.

Hence, value is not brought into the interaction but comes about in the interpretive processes involved in the interaction. I have argued that the specific literature does not help to explain value in B2B sales interactions as it either has a different level of analysis, as in the case of the B2B and service marketing literature, or, as with the sales literature, it adopts a different perspective. For these reasons, theoretical awareness and sensitivity to the existing discussions pervade my study but no specific theoretical concepts as part of a pre-established theoretical framework are used to analyze the empirical material. Instead, I will elaborate on a theoretical perspective in the following chapter that provides me with an interpretive framework, which I have adopted to make sense of alleged value created in the empirical realities in salesperson-customer relationships.



# Chapter Three - A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

While the former chapter has positioned my argument for this study in the relevant theoretical discussions, this one serves to explain the perspective, or the interpretive repertoire, that I have used to make sense of my empirical material. As with any perspective, also that of the symbolic interactionist is one view of reality and therefore limited. It provides, however, a framework and terminology for my research endeavor to investigate the *coming about of value in the interaction between salesperson and customer through their acts, interpretations and reactions*. This means that value cannot be brought into the interaction by the salesperson but is constructed in the interaction with the customer through their actions and interpretations. Customer and salesperson interpret value as it is determined by the meanings that they assign to objects or actions. But value is also created, constructed or brought about in the interaction through those acts influencing the interpretation of the other. In line with the conceptualization of value as interpretive, contextual and interactive, I use the symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective to understand the salesperson's value creation attempts in sales interactions as a social and symbolic activity. The SI perspective considers the individual's social interactions in the past and those that take place in the present as constitutive of their acts (Blumer, 1969). Social interaction is symbolic as people interpret other individual's acts and objects they are facing and respond according to what these mean or symbolize for them. Hence, individuals exchange symbols and influence one another's symbolic realities in interaction (Charon, 2007).

## Social Interaction

The central idea of Symbolic Interactionism is that humans are active social beings (Mead, 1938; Blumer, 1969). Charon (2007) elaborates on what this means in particular. Individuals are *active* as they are not simply conditioned by external stimuli but constantly thinking and reflecting on the self and other individuals, as well as on the larger society based on imagination of future and past experience. The reflection of the self and the interpretation of other individuals' acts constitute their definition of the situation based on which they act back. Individuals are to a great extent in control of what they are doing, making choices, and having control over what they are thinking, evaluating and planning. This means they are constantly thinking, in mind action, defining and redefining self, others and the situation before they act (Charon, 2007). Blumer's (1969) quote illustrates:

'In order to act the individual has to identify what (he or she) wants, establish an objective or goal, map out a prospective line of behavior, note and interpret the actions of others, ... and frequently spur (himself or herself) on in the face of dragging dispositions or discouraging settings.' (122)

Hence, in the essence of the SI perspective the individual is neither a direct consequence of their personality nor of their environment in the form of a stimulus-response mechanism, but instead an active social being with control over what he or she is thinking, evaluating and planning. However, according to Charon (2007) there are three possible constraints: Firstly, that individuals are restricted in what they do, hence they are manipulated and influenced through interaction with other individuals whose definitions they adopt. Secondly, alternative actions that are not directed are non-conscious actions, habits, and impulses; in these situations individuals do not choose their actions and are not in control. And thirdly, the ability to be free is restricted in '*words, knowledge, and ability to think with good information*' (Charon, 2007:186).

Moreover, individuals are *social* beings since it is their day-to-day life-long interactions with other humans that direct them to what they do (Charon, 2007). Hence, they do not only consider what their acts lead to but also what their consequential effects are on others. Individuals direct their actions according to those whose perspectives they assume in the situation they encounter, hence what they consider as right, wrong or appropriate depends on

the perceptions they assume their significant others and reference groups to have. The concept of *joint action* coined by Blumer's (1969) Symbolic Interactionism entails the idea that humans act based on interpretations of the situation and take not only the own interest but also those of relevant others into account. People design their actions to fit the lines of action that they consider appropriate taking into consideration their interpretation of the other's actions and the own interests (Blumer, 1969, 1980). Part of what people do is independent of others when they plan their actions but they have to figure out in every situation how to act in relation to their goals. In interactions with others, however, they are planners of action but also recipients of action when they adjust themselves to anticipated lines of action (Prus, 1989). Thus, as interactors, individuals are dependent on how their acts are perceived by others (Prus, 1989), therefore they might attempt to influence how others define them and promote particular images (Goffman, 1959). In the collaborative nature of interaction lies that while both individuals might start the interaction with certain intentions, the outcomes could be quite different from those attempted by either of them.

In order to take the other into account, individuals need to understand the consequences of their actions through understanding their effects on others (Charon, 2007). This is what in Symbolic Interactionism is referred to as role taking. This process could also be described as imagination with which individuals take on the perspectives or even emotions of the other as they act. Colored by the own interpretation, individuals judge other people's intentions, their actions and feelings towards these people and their actions towards themselves (Strauss, 1959). One could imagine situations where the individual is not interested in taking the other's perspective into account for their acts. This could be in an interaction with a dominant power imbalance. Imagine, for example, a salesperson who is dependent on a customer, clearly the customer is less likely to engage in acts of role taking than the salesperson. As Charon explains role taking is necessary to achieve the own goals in relation to other people but also to maintain the cooperation of the others and continue the interaction (Charon, 2007). An interaction is not likely to continue if at least one of the individuals involved does not feel their interests and goals to be taken into account and pursued in the interaction. I will elaborate further later on why role taking is important in sales interactions for the salesperson's attempts to create value.



## Symbolic Activity

One of the main principles in SI is that *'human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them'* (Blumer, 1969:2). Hence, individuals create their own subjective reality of the 'situation-as-is' through thinking and meaning-making but this subjective reality can always change with subjects reworking their perceptions and it is influenced in the interaction with other individuals and their definitions of those objects (intersubjective reality) (Blumer, 1980). This meaning-making process in social interaction involves a symbolic understanding (Charon, 2007). Objects do not possess an inherent or intrinsic meaning but instead meanings are also attributed to objects by those involved in the interaction. Hence, the meaning of actions and social objects is actively created by the individuals through interpretation and definition of the situation (Charon, 2007). Or, in other words, objects become meaningful through the social interaction.

The individuals' acts towards objects entail the meanings that they attach to them or, in other words, the meanings of individuals are represented symbolically in their acts and language (Charon, 2007). Hence, an interaction should be perceived in the light of what the meaning or the symbolic significance is for the individuals. The individuals exchange symbols in the interaction, language being the major medium, and influence each other's symbolic significance (meaning) of objects (Prus, 1989). Symbols are expressed by words and objects, and almost all interpersonal acts contain a symbolic element (Charon, 2007). While some symbols are rather well established, individuals are still dependent on social interactions to confirm their perception and therefore may alter the definitions of the other in the interaction (Prus, 1989)

If one were to imagine a sales interaction, a salesperson could choose to use very technical terminology when communicating with the customer to demonstrate his or her in-depth knowledge. The salesperson might do so, because the customer asks for advice and the salesperson wants to give the impression of being credible and trustworthy. The technical terminology could indeed symbolize credibility to the customer, but it could also signify power and indicate the power difference between the salesperson who knows what the customer's problem is and the customer who does not. Hence, technical

terminology could for the customer just as well symbolize arrogance as credibility depending on the situation.

## Salespeople's Attempts to Create Value

Looking at the sales interaction, the concept of joint action entails that both, salesperson and customer make adjustments keeping the other in mind because they know that they are ultimately dependent on the other to reach their related goals. This means that both salesperson and customer are dependent on the other's willingness to cooperate, that is, to allow the other to achieve their separate goals by participating and contributing to the interaction. By imagining the other's perspective, the salesperson and customer can work out how their respective acts could influence the interpretation and acts of the other and align them accordingly in the interaction. Charon's (2007) statement clarifies this explanation further:

'We change how we play it [the role] when we see that what we are doing does not work or when others tell us through their actions that it is unsatisfactory.' (p. 162).

Joint action, however, does not mean describing interactions as always intentionally cooperative, equal or symmetric (Charon, 2007). Asymmetries in power based on differences in role perceptions and information could be considered common in salesperson-customer interactions. While the customer could have the power to choose, given the knowledge about alternatives, without experiencing considerable drawbacks, the salesperson often has the information or knowledge about products and production possibilities but not necessarily the knowledge about the customer's application possibilities or problems. Hence, the potentially contrasting interests of profit seeking and receiving fair value for money makes the interactions asymmetric.

Assuming that salespeople intend to create value for the customer and themselves, they act in accordance with what they think symbolizes value for him or her, or what they think to be valuable for the customer. This understanding of the customer's perspective is based on the salesperson's interpretation of the overt acts and reactions of the customer in the interaction. The salesperson's attempts to create value for the customer are thus influenced

by the customer's actions and reactions in pursuit of the own goals in the interaction. Hence, *salespeople's attempts to create value for the customer are influenced by the customer's actions and reactions with which he or she pursues the own goals in the interaction.*

Moreover, in doing so, the salesperson changes his or her role and the lines of action influenced by the customer's reactions. If the salesperson feels that what he or she is doing '*does not work*' because the reactions from the customer are '*unsatisfactory*' (Charon, 2007:162), it can be assumed that the salesperson will use a different strategy, if he or she wants the interaction to work out, because it might be necessary for achieving own goals. Reactions from the customer could be, for example, expressions such as 'thank you' or 'great' that depending on the related gestures and acts could seemingly show appreciation or be a polite way of getting rid of the salesperson. Different words or gestures could symbolize different things for the individuals and the meanings of the symbolic acts are interpreted in the context of the interaction. Hence, *the salespeople in their attempt to create value are likely to change their acts and roles based on what they interpret to be positive reactions from the customer in the interaction.*

To exemplify my point, one could imagine a salesperson who presents a design solution to the customer that the salesperson believes to be valuable for the latter as it optimizes the use of the pallet. The customer, however, instead of showing enthusiasm, thanking the salesperson, and taking the design, asks questions and raises concerns about the design. In the end the customer asks for another design. Even though the salesperson mentions explicitly what he or she considered to be valuable for the customer, the latter does not seem to show a satisfactory reaction. So the salesperson has to go back and change the packaging to answer to the concerns of the customer. When the salesperson returns with the new design the customer seems happy, thanks the salesperson who is then briefed for a new packaging project.

Even though this is a very short and simplified version of a sales encounter, it exemplifies that in their attempt to create value for the customer, salespeople fit their lines of action to what seems to create positive reactions from the customer. It also exemplifies, however, that the salesperson attempts to create value for him- or herself by pursuing the own goals in the interaction. One could assume that the salesperson did not only optimize because he or she thought it would be perceived as valuable by the customer but even because he

might get something out of it. For example, with a cost saving for the customer the salesperson might be able to ask for a higher price for the packaging. In this interaction, however, it seemed that the customer did not get what he or she expected and consequently neither could the salesperson pursue his or her goal. Hence, the interaction suggests that the salespeople find that their own definitions of objects, their interests and strategies undergo change as they are being constituted while interacting with the customer (Prus, 1989). It also highlights that salespeople need to judge throughout each interaction whether to prioritize the own or customer value.

The reason why the salesperson can attempt to create value but not control it is because interactions are subject to creation and negotiation of meanings. As Prus (1989) puts it *'stripped of their contexts and applications objects have no inherent value'* (p.64). Hence, the value does not lie in the physical structures of the object but in what this object means or symbolizes for the individual. In this meaning-making process the individual interprets the object in the interaction while engaging in mind action, hence, relating to the own situation, past experiences and future plans but also to relevant others (Charon, 2007). Consequently, the value for an individual can be influenced by the individual preferences but also by a wider social context (Edvardsson et al., 2011), or in other words value does not only have a subjective but also a collective or intersubjective dimension (Smith, 1989). The salesperson can influence and alter the meanings and definitions that the customer constructs through interacting more or less intentionally. For example, when a salesperson drives to the customer to bring him or her a sample of a display that could have been sent by post, the salesperson signals importance to this product. This act could symbolize for the customer the worth of the display project, or him or her for the salesperson or it could symbolize convenience. All these interpretations are dependent on the customer's situation.

In short, I propose that salespeople's *'attempt to create value is a social and symbolic activity as it comes about in the interpersonal interaction between salesperson and customer'*. It is a social activity as they try to fit their actions towards each other based on what their interpretations of the other's (re) actions and their imagination of the other's perspective. And it is a symbolic activity, since value is interpreted based on what the acts (and expressions) of the one symbolize for the other. It is, thus, not the salesperson who determines the values in interaction but it is a common effort of influencing and evaluating.

This is in line with the conceptualization of value as interpretive, contextual and interactive that I argued for in Chapter 2.

This chapter has provided some key insights on symbolic interactionism that are relevant for my study and insights on how I adapt the perspective to the study of value creation in sales interaction. In the following chapter I will discuss in detail the implications of this perspective for my study design. One aspect that I want to raise here is the difficulty for researchers to present their study in a linear process for readers to follow the logic. The study process itself is rarely linear, and often referred to as an iterative reasoning, going back and forth between theory and empirics (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Also in this study, I have discovered the SI perspective to make sense of the material at one point in my process that constitutes several rounds of interpretation of my empirical material. Writing this chapter in retrospect after interpreting the material informed by ideas from SI, inevitably induces empirical insights in this section. While I have not seen myself able to go back to the 'non-informed stage' anymore when writing this section, I still consider it crucial to be at this point in the thesis for readers to understand the perspective and ideas that came about throughout the interpretation influencing the latter as well as the coding and categorization of themes.

# Chapter Four - Method

Throughout the former chapters, I have argued that it is necessary to better understand the coming about of value in sales interactions, given the interpretive, contextual and interactive nature of value. Therefore, I have chosen to investigate the salesperson's attempts to create value as a social and symbolic activity (Blumer, 1969). Left to elaborate are the methodological choices that I have made based on a symbolic interactionist perspective when designing the practicalities of doing the research.

## Methodological Choices

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is different from other streams in the social sciences in that it is interested in the cause of human action, not, however, as casual variables inside or outside the human action that influence the action of the individual beyond his or her will. Instead it sees the cause in '*human definition, self-direction, and choice in situations*' (Charon, 2007:188). This relates back to the previously elaborated ideas that the individual acts as a result of thought processes that interpret the own situation in terms of past experience and future plans but also the other's acts in interaction. Based on these thought processes the individual defines the situation that he or she is in and decides on a course of action. Hence, SI tries to find methodological techniques that can give answers to the question of what people are doing and what influences their course of action (Charon, 2007).

## Close to empirical reality

According to Blumer (1969) the researcher must study a phenomenon ‘out there’ through ‘firsthand observation’, getting close to their research subjects and digging deep in order to attend to the meanings or definitions that people make of the situation as they carry out their activities. As Blumer (1969) summarizes *‘for symbolic interactionism the nature of the empirical social world is to be discovered to be dug out by a direct, careful, and probing examination of that world.’* (p. 48). Hence, I aim to describe people in real settings, how they work in real situations and to do this I need to familiarize myself with social contexts (Charon, 2007). However, it is complex to study people as they confront their day-to-day existence, engage in their variety of activities and interactions with other people since much of what is happening is hidden from the researcher who is often unfamiliar with the social contexts under study (Blumer, 1980). Blumer (1969) proposes two processes, ‘exploration’ where the researcher familiarizes him- or herself with the social context of study in order to be sufficiently grounded in the empirical reality, and ‘inspection’ in which the researcher conceptualizes the empirical material and examines whether the analytical elements find their empirical evidence (Blumer, 1969). These processes show that SI studies derive their theories primarily empirically and inductively.

I have always considered empirical richness as crucial to my project, the rather inductive approach to my material, however, is a result of my research process. While I have started off with combing through the literature, looking for a theoretical framework that explains the activities and processes around value in the sales interaction, I have only found unsatisfactory or insufficient insights as elaborated in my critique in Chapter 2. As a consequence of realizing that none of the theories dealing with my research endeavor could give a satisfactory preliminary answer to my research question, I have argued that in order to get novel insights and generate knowledge, an empirical and inductive approach is necessary; even if it does not provide the comfort of knowing what to look for before starting the research. Hence, I have decided to take an inductive, bottom-up or *empirically grounded approach to theory development*. This, however, also means that I have not entered my analytical process with a tabula rasa, a notion, though little pragmatic, has been defended by some strong ambassadors of inductive research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). Many researchers using inductively grounded theory approaches to their empirical material,

however, support a more moderate position towards the involvement of theory and the possibility of holding prior ideas and interests.

I want to elaborate on those background ideas that have informed my overall research problem and enabled me to sense my empirical phenomenon, which is what Blumer (1954) calls a sensitizing concept. He distinguishes a sensitizing concept from a definitive one and describes it in the following:

‘... it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.’ (Blumer, 1954:7)

The concept of value creation has made me sensitive to the empirical setting of sales interactions. Through the literature and the common-sense notion in businesses, I have started to see sales interactions as an empirical phenomenon for the theoretical concept of value creation. The sales interaction is constituted by one person from one company whose role is defined as seller in the market, the party that offers something, and another person that plays a buyer role, the party that needs something. I have started my study, theoretically informed about different ways the theory looks upon value and value creation. Preexisting theoretical perspectives are considered as an essential and important source of inspiration to theorizing efforts. Not only because they encourage imaginative theorizing (Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2004) but also because reflecting on this pre-existing theory encourages the researcher to engage in the dialogue with the scientific community (Andersen & Kragh, 2010). As elaborated at length in Chapter 3, the theory of SI provided me with a lens and sensitizing concepts (joint action, role taking) to investigate the sales interactions with regard to value and value creation.

Hence, as a result of my research process, I take an analytical approach where the thick empirical descriptions play a central role. Based on my interpretations of the empirical world and theoretically informed I try to arrive at an imaginative understanding of my empirical phenomenon.



## Observing activities in interaction: shadowing

As elaborated before, SI argues that people's behavior cannot be reduced to the individual's properties since the individual is active in choosing his or her actions based on the meaning it constructs of things. Hence, if individuals actively act back towards the environment based on the meanings constructed in a social and interpretative process, they interact with the self and other individuals bringing in their definitions of those things (Blumer, 1969), '*we need to study interaction, and interaction of human being relies heavily on the use of symbols*' (Charon, 2007:25). Hence, the interaction between individuals is the basic unit of analysis (Charon, 2007). The desired result is a careful description of some important process in human action answering what an action or process is about, what the people do when they are involved in it, what they think and do in interactions (Charon, 2007). I can, however, only understand the definition and perspective of others based on my observation of their overt action, activities or talks, and that will always require my own interpretation, which is influenced by my own perspective.

While the elaboration on how exactly I have conducted my research follows later in this chapter, I want to argue at this point for why I have chosen to do what I did in order to go about my study endeavor. I have chosen to *shadow salespeople*. This technique involves a researcher closely following a member of an organization over an extended period of time. The obvious reason is the perspective that I take in my study. I relate to the literature arguing that salespeople create value in customer interactions and their related internal interactions, but argue that it is not brought into the interaction by the salesperson, rather created through social and symbolic activity in the interaction between both. While this means that I take the perspective of the salesperson on the interactions, it is important to not equate this study on interactions with one on salesperson's perceptions, understandings or definitions, as mentioned before. By shadowing salespeople, I cannot only observe the interactions but also grasp the salesperson's meaning of what is happening. Shadowing enables the researcher to ask the one being shadowed questions relating to certain activities or events to generate an explanatory commentary. Some of the questions will be for clarification; others will be intended to reveal the purpose of the behavior (McDonald, 2005). This running commentary then helps to encourage understanding of what is happening (McDonald, 2005).

When shadowing, rather than observing the meetings, the interactions are not only made intelligible through the commentary of the salesperson but also through those activities and actions happening before and after during the day. Even though it is the interaction at present that I am interested in, observing previous, future or related interactions and actions have helped to understand the context of each interaction and the reason behind the observed actions. Also, observing the related internal interactions is necessary to provide the full picture of selling, not only the 'front end'. Finally, shadowing had a very practical advantage over other observation techniques since interactions and the work of the salesperson provide challenges with regard to time and space that are difficult to master otherwise (Czarniawska & Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007). Firstly, the nature of the interaction between salespeople and customers but also colleagues cannot be grasped at one work setting because of the physical separation between these parties. Secondly, the job is essentially very mobile, thus the constant change of location would make it challenging to 'find' these interactions without having been taken to them by either the customer or the salesperson.

One could argue that also with in-depth interviews I can study a salesperson's understanding of selling and their definitions of sales situations. From these interviews I could learn about the processes in which they deal with fulfilling customer requests, satisfying the customer and generally carrying out activities that they know make the customer happy. So why have I chosen to only consider interviews as an auxiliary method? I would argue that in-depth interviews would lead to a different study, not one on (my interpretations of) actions and related interpretations in salesperson interactions but one on (my interpretation of) the salesperson's perceptions and interpretations of sales interactions. Moreover, trying to capture the interactiveness of the sales encounter and therewith the value accomplishment through interviews is a very difficult task since interactions consist of so much detail in actions and reactions. Whether they are routine or special activities, conscious or less conscious reactions, to give a detailed account of an interaction as one of the participants is very challenging (some stories of interactions are involved in this study as complement). Finally, the study is interested in the interpretation of value in a symbolic form, negotiated through the social interaction. Asking the research subjects to express these interpretations and meanings and interpret what they are saying seems more difficult than making assumptions about the meanings that individuals create and the reasons for their acts based on the actions and

reactions in relation to other people. Therefore, the best option to capture the dynamic and interactiveness of meaning-making and the construction of value appeared to me to *observe the activities in the interaction*.

## **Interpreting value creation in sales interactions**

I have argued before that in order to generate novel insights and not stick to existing conceptualizations, especially when these fall short on supplying those insights (!), one might have to leave the comfort zone of knowing what to look for when carrying out empirical investigations. Hence, the reasoning for my empirically grounded approach in my study is that one does not need to know what value is in order to study how it comes about. The critic of such an approach would challenge the study asking how I can be sure that what I am observing is value creation and not something else. I guess the first answer would be that I can never be sure whether the customer considers this interaction as valuable, but this is why I talk about '*attempts*' of value creation by the salesperson.

However, I would argue that there is also no other methodological approach that can be sure about it. Those people who would say 'well, just ask the customer', move on a more slippery methodological ground. The first challenge that this researcher would encounter is on a practical level, figuring out how to ask a customer whether he or she perceives value. How do you ask about value without having a rather concrete pre-conceptualization? Or can you confront someone with a question such as 'Did you consider the interaction as valuable?' or 'Did you perceive value?'. The next challenge is the comment of the critic asking, 'How can you be sure that the people know what they are talking about and that they are able or willing to express what they are thinking or feeling?' Hence, the point that I have tried to bring across is that being sure about value being perceived or something being interpreted as value is a difficult task. And on a side note, it is possibly the reason for the surprising lack of empirical studies given the importance of the topic.

Nevertheless, I aim to empirically explore the construction of value through the salesperson's attempts creating value with the help of the symbolic interactionist perspective that provides me with the necessary interpretative repertoire and the logical argumentation, as presented in Chapter 3. I then try to substantiate my

claims about value creation attempts of the salesperson with sufficient empirical grounding in salesperson-customer interactions and argumentation that make my interpretations intelligible for the reader. Providing rich empirical material accompanying my interpretations gives the reader the freedom to make own interpretations of what is happening in the interactions.

## A Single Case Setting

Considering it is so important to tell a story that is '*clear, compelling, fascinating, and convincing enough to capture the reader's attention*' (Borghini, Carù & Cova, 2010:18), a case setting is powerful to describe a phenomena so detailed and in context that readers feel as if they are observing the same phenomena and are part of the experience (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Borghini et al., 2010). Hence, I have chosen to stick to a single case setting with the ambition to provide richness through the empirical illustrations and findings that are based on a sound understanding of the case's context (Narayandas & Rangan, 2004; Weick, 2007; Geiger & Finch, 2009). This single case setting is the sales force of SCA Packaging (SCAP), more specifically those of the German and Austrian organizations.

SCAP was the (paper) packaging business unit of the Svenska Cellulosa Aktiebolaget that is the second largest packaging provider in Europe. In the spring of 2012 SCAP was acquired by DS Smith Packaging. The paper packaging industry is a fragmented, competitive industry with a few international payers and many smaller local manufacturers. With the production of paper packaging, of mainly corrugated conventional board (70%), and only a smaller part in the high-end consumer packaging (18%), SCAP came under the pressure of decreasing margins and established their vision of the full-service provider in the year 2007<sup>1</sup>. With that SCAP is a typical example of a manufacturing company that promotes the idea of creating value for the customer by moving into the service and solution business to counteract the profit squeeze in the face of commoditization (Gebauer, Fleisch & Friedli, 2005; Penttinen & Palmer, 2007; Jacob & Ulaga, 2008; Raddats & Easingwood, 2010). The reason why this is crucial is that this study thematizes specifically

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<sup>1</sup> More information about SCAP follows in Chapter 5

B2B selling in non-standardized markets, in those customer interactions where the product or solution is the outcome rather than the input. At the point in time when I started my research, the company has already been three years in the process of changing from a traditional manufacturing firm to becoming 'a full-service packaging provider by growing and differentiating our core business to offer our customers increased value' (company mission). For this purpose SCAP has, as part of many efforts, introduced major communication and other training for the sales force in order to introduce the mindset and skills that are supposed to enable them to sell services and solutions and create value for the customer beyond product delivery. Finally, it has been a pragmatic decision since the cooperation with SCAP takes the format of a learning partnership which provided me with the necessary benefits of time and access that were important for the kind of study I had in mind.

The main reason why I have not considered including several case settings in my study has simply been that I did not consider it valuable for the kind of study I wanted to do. Besides, the learning partnership restricted me in the choice to work with other companies in the same industry. While certain aspects of the context are important for the positioning of my study, that is a B2B sales context and that the company is (at least partially) in a non-standardized market context, it would have been disturbing to have greater variety in any of these system level factors, such as industry, company structure and management for my study. The level of analysis in this study is the individual and while I wanted to encounter a variety of observations between salespeople and customers, major differences in product and production would have distracted and absorbed my energy into understanding contextual details rather than underlying social processes in sales interactions. Eventually in the process I would have had to subtract these details. Moreover, the variety in sales interactions is already great, simply because there are two different individuals with different goals and experiences meeting trying to fit their lines of action to the other and influence the interaction in a way that it ends in the desired outcome.

## Engaging with Practice

The before-mentioned learning partnership that this study builds upon should be explained in more detail at this point as it has some consequences for the research process. The learning partnership exists between the Institute of Economic Research at Lund University and the sponsor company SCA Packaging. The specialty of these learning partnerships is that the project is defined between both parties in order to guarantee learning and benefits for both. At times, it has been quite challenging to manage several stakeholders' interests throughout the three project years, especially when business situations and challenges are never static. On the positive side, there are many benefits beyond the sponsorship itself. The proximity to real life business happenings over time, the intellectual exchange with business experts and management, including feedback loops during the project development, let alone the very privileged, welcoming access that is the crux of every researcher's work.

Thanks to this partnership I had the luxury of a period of three years to familiarize myself with the company, the industry and my research topic, adjusting the latter based on my empirical impressions. After I first set out to write about branding in B2B selling, my first empirical impressions with country management and salespeople gave me fairly quickly the impression that, firstly, it was not relevant to any research subject that I met outside the headquarters, secondly, I felt that putting a branding hat on my research would not be able to capture anywhere near all the interesting aspects that I have seen throughout my first days with the salespeople. Therefore, I decided during my empirical research to be more open and had still enough time to let myself be inspired for a new angle.

### **Familiarization and research process**

Referring back to the idea of naturalistic inquiry (Blumer, 1969) it is crucial for the researcher to get familiar with the phenomenon of study since it is an inductive and empirical inquiry that aims to capture the meaning of the research subjects and be honest with them. Hence, the 'exploration' phase enables the researcher to become familiar with the phenomenon of study and build up a

close understanding that helps him or her to 'stay grounded' in the empirical reality in the subsequent interpretations of the material (Blumer, 1980).

As already indicated, I had the access and time to get familiar with the company, the industry and the problems that the management has seen with regard to their sales force before I started the in-depth empirical research phases of shadowing. The first meeting with the SCA Packaging project sponsors, the European operations manager and the European marketing and sales manager, from the HQ in Brussels was at the very beginning of my PhD project in summer 2009. This meeting was set up mostly to get to know the sponsors and to define the frame and focus of the project. Two one-week visits at the HQ in Brussels enabled me to talk to the European Marketing & Sales team as well as some European Account Managers and gather the first seven interviews. The purpose of these semi-structured interviews has been to gather knowledge about the past and future initiatives that have been planned within the marketing and sales transformation, addressing specifically the sales force as well as general communication between management and sales force. Moreover, I got access to the company's intranet over two years to keep myself up to date about the different changes and initiatives, strategy documents and to see how the different countries and country management work with their sales force. Later on at a plant visit in Malmö where I interviewed the sales manager in Sweden, the plant sales manager and two salespeople at the plant, I gained first empirical insights into the sales work and the management of the sales force (four interviews). At that point I understood well enough that while the vision of the company of being a full-service provider is the same, the managers in the company had different ideas about the consequences for selling and what makes good selling.

After deciding to shadow salespeople in their work, I presented my research plan to the different regional sales managers, the manager of the region Germany/Switzerland showed particular interest. The German sales organization has at that point, together with the Hungarian one, been the only one that operates with a centralized sales organization independent of the plants. With the wide product portfolio and production facilities, design competence and extra services as well as fierce competition from smaller and cheaper local manufacturers, SCAP Germany has early on and eagerly followed the mission to become full-service provider and has already started to work on different initiatives for the sales force. Finally, language is an enabler or barrier to

research, especially when it comes to in-depth research that includes shadowing, document studies and interviews, and German is my mother tongue. Hence, the project started in summer 2010 with initial meetings and interviews with the marketing and sales directors at the German sales organization's headquarters (four interviews) and my first two days shadowing of the strategic account manager that makes most turnover for the German organization; followed by an observation of a two-day sales training which gave me a first insight and the contextual knowledge about the German sales organization, the products, the customers and general market situation. At this training I got the chance to interview five salespeople face-to-face and by phone to get better ideas on the challenges and crucial aspects in their work.

In a first round, I spent two weeks observing seven different salespeople from the North and Southeast sales regions. After a first feedback round with the German sales and marketing manager, I have decided to spend more than one day with each of these salespeople in order to get a better picture of their work practices. In September, I have spent one month in the North region and observed six salespeople, four of whom I have already accompanied in the first round. The aim with the wider time span has been to have the possibility of participating in several meetings for a project of one salesperson with one customer; this has, however, proved to be impractical. The salesperson has usually had only one meeting with the same customer within a period of one month. The rest of the time I agreed with the salespeople to contact me when they have meetings with customers and I have kept myself available during that time. Finally, out of curiosity I asked some salespeople whether I could talk to their customers once, since a few of them gave me their business cards at the meetings. So I had about six phone interviews with customers to get a feeling of the insights I could gain by asking the customer side what they appreciate from their salespeople.

During this time I also had the chance to visit the Fachpack for three days. This is the biggest German paper packaging fair and the only one where SCA Packaging is present. Since I could not be identified as a SCA Packaging employee, it was easy for me to talk to employees of the main competitors and get a better insight into the industry. After the consolidation and a first analysis of the material another feedback meeting has taken place in which we have agreed to change the design back to the initial state for the time in the southern region where I spent 2-3 days with each salesperson in a row, those I have met before. The analysis of this material and some first conclusions has then been



presented to the European management board and my sponsors, which initiated a fruitful discussion and interesting feedback. This discussion also encouraged undertaking the same study in another country and together with the management of SCAP, the Austrian market has been considered a good option.

I have chosen to conduct a study in Austria to complement the findings in Germany, in order to achieve more variety in the salesperson and company resources, as well as the customer interactions. Culturally, however, the Austrian organization is fairly close to Germany, but apart from that, it is different because it is much smaller with regard to production possibilities and salespeople. However, through their cooperation with German and Hungarian plants, the Austrian sales organization tries to complement the own product portfolio in order to offer full service to their customers. Hence, in the summer of 2011 I did another two weeks of shadowing three different salespeople and observing an Austrian sales team meeting.

## **Shadowing salespeople**

I have already discussed why I have chosen the shadowing technique at the beginning of this method chapter. Shadowing is special in the sense that it not only leads to observation material but also a running commentary from the shadowee and answers to questions from the researcher throughout the shadowing time. Therefore, this method not only answers the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions but also provides more insights to understanding the interests and intentions behind certain activities.

I have shadowed thirteen male salespeople over three of their workdays (see Appendix 2 for salespeople’s background). A working day of a salesperson has on average consisted of one to three customer interactions as well as one interaction with a colleague, sometimes via the phone. The choices have been made pragmatically throughout my research process given the problems of geographical distance and the different frequencies of customer visits as elaborated in the following research process; but still with the intention to get a wide range of empirical observations of sales interactions. The group of salespeople consists of two German strategic account managers who are responsible for one or two customers only; five key account managers who are responsible for bigger customers that might need a wider network of different

plants, and six account managers. These salespeople have been from Austria and two different regional sales areas in Germany, which enabled a variety of different customer industries, hence, customer interests, problems and needs. Gender has not been a matter of choice as the Austrian sales force has no female salespersons and the German one only two who were geographically not accessible to me.

If possible, I have recorded interactions with customers and internal colleagues as well as running commentaries, and transcribed this afterwards. Otherwise, careful field notes have been taken. Shadowing has been the main source of empirical material in this study as it does not only generate the observations but also the explanatory commentaries, as well as salespeople's stories about customer and internal interactions that they recount throughout the day either because they preceded the observed interaction, or because the observed interaction reminded them, or because they were special in some way. Additionally, I often had the time to ask some more general, interview-like questions either during a lunch break or while driving the car. These questions helped to gain more knowledge about the salesperson's background and their perception of how they work and what is important in their work (see Appendix 3 for interview guide). All interview-like situations have been recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Considering that I have gained quite a lot of contextual knowledge and have actually experienced the context, I trust my translations from my mother tongue into English to mirror my interpretation and understanding of what has been said. I have summarized the insights from the interview-like conversations into short ethnographic salesperson accounts presented in Chapter 5. I have sorted and summarized the interactions and salesperson stories about interactions that came about throughout the day in a table that served later on as overview for the interpretation and coding in the data analysis stage.

### **A day on the road as a shadower**

My days on the road usually required much preparation, I needed to coordinate with the salespeople where and when we would meet, sometimes they could come and pick me up from my 'home-base' in the northern sales region, sometimes I took the train to a certain city or location that was more convenient for the upcoming customer visit and the next step involved finding somewhere

to stay overnight that was closer to the customers that the salesperson planned to visit. The days usually started sometime in the morning when I got picked up at the agreed location by the salesperson and we started driving to the first meeting. During that time I tried to present myself and clarify what I wanted to do and the salesperson told me about the plans for the day or the upcoming days. Usually I started asking some questions about their background in the industry, the profession, what kind of customers they have and often we already talked more specifically about the customers we were going to visit and the issues or projects with these customers. The rest of the day with the different salespeople was, however, as different as they could be. With some salespeople, usually the key or strategic account manager, we spent a lot of time on the road driving long distances sometimes just to visit only one customer or different contacts at one customer. With others, the day was packed with different visits and errands, naturally all much shorter than those one-stop visits. When we got to a customer the salesperson usually presented me to the customer as a student writing a thesis about sales. In almost all situations the customer was not particularly surprised about my presence since the salesperson seemed to have informed the customer the day before via email or telephone. Sometimes the customer asked me some questions or wanted to know more details but mostly they got to the reason for the meeting right away. In those meetings with small talk at the beginning or often at the end I have sometimes been involved either by the salesperson or by the customer asking me questions.

Besides the difference in frequency and lengths of customer visits, the atmosphere on these occasions has varied considerably depending on the reason for the visit and the relationship between the salesperson and the customer contact; some were very formal, some informal, others professional but somewhat informal and friendly. While some salespeople hardly visited any of the plants to meet with internal colleagues, others ended each of their working days at the plant with short meetings or updates for the respective internal salesperson and designer. And finally, of course, another major difference was how much the salespeople talked and what they talked about. Most salespeople were very informative and open, talking a lot about their work and what was going on. Others talked more generally about the job and working for SCAP and again others asked more questions and wanted to talk about other things in life than work. Usually my shadowing day ended around 18.00 with being dropped off at the initial meeting point or at some hotel from where we were to start our next day by driving somewhere else. For the salespeople, however, the

working day usually continued, at least based on what they said, by writing visit reports, thinking about solutions or designs and answering or writing emails.

The most challenging issue has been trying to pay attention to everything and I was very grateful that I was often able to record throughout the day. I started understanding the industry and the technical background of packaging rather quickly thanks to my initial contextual knowledge and frequent plant visits. However, there was still a lot of information that I had to not only understand but also consider whether it was relevant for me. I had to be observant in customer meetings trying to grasp the atmosphere of the interaction and understand what is happening. In addition I still had to be friendly, chatty and attentive with the salesperson and when meeting the customer. All the different types of activities, seeing what is happening, asking clarifying questions, making sense of the situation and categorizing according to importance or relevance signify quite an intellectual challenge and is often referred to as split-vision challenge in observation-type techniques (Czarniawska & Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007). Despite the fact that I did not need to play an active role in the different interactions, the constant social interaction with the salesperson during the day, in addition to the processing and prioritization of information and wondering about my research project and questions, sometimes made me so exhausted that I found myself doing small talk, noticing that I stopped paying attention to the details and precise technical issues in the salesperson's elaborations.

Another challenge with shadowing is evidently my presence at the events, the so-called Hawthorne or observer effect (Shipman, 1997). One important issue for me from the beginning was to make the salespeople feel comfortable with my presence so that they did not feel that I expected them to do their job in a certain way, other than they usually would do it. I tried to work out the easiest way for me, a young female university student, to get along with the salespeople, usually 40-60 year-old men with long experience of the industry. To start with, I have tried to match my dress code to that of the salespeople which is usually rather formal. As known from research, trust is greater with perceived similarity. However, similarity was difficult to achieve considering the obvious differences in characteristics, background and current interests between the salespeople and me. My way of trying to overcome any feelings of suspicion from the salespeople was first, not to mention my contact with the management unless necessary, and preferably underline my genuine interest in selling. Second, appearing a little more naïve, less knowledgeable and experienced but more curious seems to have

encouraged salespeople to tell me their interesting stories, explain and teach me about their job. My impression was that the difference in age, gender and academic background has in this situation rather helped me conduct the research as it has triggered their genuinely sympathetic attitude towards me and their ambition to explain to me, someone who has got all her knowledge from books, about the real world out there.

Looking back now, I only ever felt uncomfortable once and that was when shadowing a salesperson who talked very little and answered only very briefly when I asked about something. However, the atmosphere eased considerably by the third day of shadowing him and he started to talk more. I heard later on from another colleague that the country sales manager called in this salesperson without that he knew the reason. That was a few days before I met him and therefore might have contributed to the salesperson's unease. With all other salespeople I felt that there was good chemistry or at least a friendly atmosphere of acceptance and openness.

I have tried to make the shadowee feel comfortable so that he or she behaves as 'normally' as possible and might in some situations even forget about my presence. However, when we have met internal colleagues or customers it has certainly made the meeting for the research subjects different from the usual ones. Since I have been very open in my empirical approach and have not focused on specific issues or topics that I could have told the salespeople about, I think that there was little reason for salespeople to behave or act in a way that differed from usual. And even if the salespeople have been a bit more thorough sometimes in their work, have been a little more friendly towards their internal colleagues, and the customers have been nicer to the salesperson, I do not consider this to have any effect on my general insights on sales interactions, sales work and the way value is created in interaction. It certainly did not influence my findings and ideas in a way that made it less useful or credible in that it had outweighed the in-depth and contextual insights gained through shadowing. Clearly, making methodological decisions always requires the researcher to accept some drawbacks.

## Analyzing the Salespeople's Interactions

After the first readings of my transcripts, field notes and summaries of the interactions and salesperson's stories of interactions, I decided which of the interactions to exclude from further analysis. The first criterion has been that meetings with potential customers (prospects) apart from a few exceptions have not been considered (six interactions). The reason is that those meetings do often not entail more than a presentation of each company and a first social talk. Additionally, they do not seem to differ from a prospect meeting of more standardized product sales or even personal selling. Secondly, very short interactions have not been included (approximately ten). During a salesperson's working day, there are many interactions that entail dropping off something, picking up something, saying hello to someone and so on. In particular, the internal interactions with designers or internal sales are often very short, last less than ten minutes, and have therefore not been considered interesting for my analysis. A third reason for discarding has been that for some, even though only a few, interactions I simply have very little material since I was not allowed to record and not able to take field notes. At a later stage in the analysis I have then decided to leave out some interactions that I could simply not make any sense of (approximately 4). Of all remaining interactions, 31 interactions (8 of them internal) and 7 stories of interactions (3 of them internal), have been coded. Not all of them have been presented in the interpretive Chapters 6 to 9, since I have presented not more than one to two interactions at length to substantiate each claim.

The second step in the naturalistic inquiry of Blumer (1969) after the 'exploration' is the 'inspection' that is described as follows:

'... I mean an intensive focused examination of the empirical content of whatever analytical elements are used for purposes of analysis, and this same kind of examination of the empirical nature of the relations between such elements.'  
(Blumer, 1969:43)

At this stage, the researcher conceptualizes the material and then carefully examines it for evidence of empirical instances of those conceptualizations. For this analytical approach the coding idea of grounded theory has been used, which is a popular interpretive tool for many researchers seeking to investigate close to empirical reality. Pragmatism and Symbolic Interactionism has

informed the grounded theory method developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) whose interest was to study *'fundamental social and social psychological processes within a social setting or a particular experience such as having a chronic illness'* (Charmaz, 2006:7). The 'inspection' that conceptualizes the material and checks these conceptualizations against the material again is consistent with grounded theorists' approach to the development and validation of codes and categories.

I use *coding as a heuristic device* in this study in order to get from empirical constructs to more abstract, theoretical ones. Charmaz (2006) considers grounded theory as principles and practices for research rather than a prescriptive method and considers these through a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective, arguing that researchers construct their grounded theories and do not discover them. Rather than following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three coding steps, open, axial and selective coding, I have been inspired by Charmaz (2006) and use two phases of coding, initial and focused coding.

I have coded the different salespersons' interactions (internal and customer) and their stories about interactions. The interpretation of the additional material from the commentary that referred to these interactions usually served to put the interactions into context. Hence, while I interpret how potential value is accomplished in the interaction between salesperson and customer, this could be supported or contrasted with my interpretation of salespeople's commentaries as to what made the interaction valuable for them or the customer. At this point I should make a remark on the varying nature of empirical material that shadowing generates and that is therefore subject to my analysis. Just as with most ethnographic-type studies, the researcher deals with material from observations that entail the own interpretation of the events, as well as with commentary, stories or statements from the research subjects that are the researcher's interpretations of the subject's interpretations. This should only be considered a strength as it enriches and 'thickens' the empirical material, as long as it is made 'transparent' and marked accordingly through wording in the text such as, 'the salesperson said', 'an interaction between A and B', etc. or through different font formatting so that the reader knows the source of the material that has been interpreted (observations in italic).

Since the interactions consisted partially of recordings and partially of field notes, the preferred level for the 'constant comparative method' (Glaser &

Strauss, 1967) is the incident rather than the line or word, (Charmaz, 2006), hence *coding interaction to interaction*. In the first phase of coding it was important for me to stay close to the empirical material but avoiding the use of the words that have been used by the research subjects. For the initial coding stage I have interpreted the different interactions based on the following questions that are informed by symbolic interactionism:

- What is happening here? (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
- What interests and goals do actors seem to seek?
- What seems to influence the salesperson's acts?
- How do the actors react and fit their behavior to each other?
- What roles do they seem to present to the other actor in the interaction?
- What symbols do the actors use in interaction and what names do they attach to objects, events, persons, roles, and settings?

With a summary table, I have compared incidents that seem similar at first sight and in a second step those that seem to be dissimilar in order to get beyond the ordinary and routine actions to reach a more analytical insight of significant processes (Charmaz, 2006). This way I could assign codes to each interaction by answering the question: What is the data a study of from the salesperson's point of view? (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006). The constant comparison between the codes helps to find categories or themes that differ with regard to certain actions, events, issues or experiences and therewith establish categories distinct in their properties and characteristics (Charmaz, 2006). The *initial codes* at this stage aim to describe what is happening in the interaction with regard to the above points. Examples of initial codes are: 'providing information', 'doing administration', 'educating the customer', 'urgent damage control', 'proposing improvement', 'surprising the customer', 'protecting the customer from complaints', only to mention a few.

*Focused coding* is then about deciding on which of these initial codes are the most feasible for creating themes in the light of the specific empirical properties and dimensions. While the initial coding approach provides a symbolic interactionist analysis of sales interactions, my main focus in this phase is to investigate what it could mean when the salesperson creates value and how this alleged value is created in the interaction. As elaborated in Chapter 3, I interpret



the acts of each individual in relation to the other with regard to their value accomplishment. Hence, in the closer interpretation of the interactions I ask myself:

- What seems to symbolize value in this interaction for those involved?
- Do the salespeople seem to attempt to create value for the customer or themselves?
- How do the salespeople act to influence the interaction in a way that seems to trigger positive reactions from the customer?
- How do the salesperson's interpretations and acts seem to be influenced by the customer's actions and reactions?

Hence, throughout this second phase of the interpretation process, I have found certain empirical dimensions that seem to account for differences in the course of the interaction. The *empirical dimensions* that seem to account for the main variance in interactions are the customers' and salespeople's situation and goal in the interaction (see Table 2). In some interactions the customers seem to be rather explicit about what they want the salesperson to do, even though they might be more or less uncertain about the how. In these interactions the salesperson seems to attempt to create value based on interpretation of the customer's actions and reactions in the interaction ('providing for customer wants', 'improving customer situations'). In other customer interactions and in the internal interactions, where related customer goals are less obvious, salespeople seem to attempt to create value based on what they know from experience or imagine being valuable for the customer from previous interaction and experience ('reducing customer workloads', 'looking after customer relationships'). The salespeople's goal or intention seems to be foremost to create value primarily for the customer but some interactions also indicate what the salesperson attempts to 'get out of' the interaction ('satisfying customers', 'defining customer problems', 'keeping up the helper image', 'differentiating', 'securing customer relationships'). The initial codes are hence categorized within these four themes, partially summarized and aggregated into a common heading, e.g. 'relieving from trouble', 'taking on work responsibilities', etc. Table 2 thus presents the categorization I have arrived at towards the end of the two coding phases, providing the structure for the following four chapters.

**Table 2**

Themes according to empirical dimensions

		Salespeople's goals and intentions	
		Create value primarily for the customer	Create value primarily for themselves
Customers' explicitness about goals or intentions in interaction			
Explicit in acts and reactions	Salesperson acts based on interpretation of customer's actions and reactions in interaction (No apparent customer uncertainty)	Providing for what the customer wants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assuring solution</li> <li>• Guaranteeing delivery</li> <li>• Sharing expert insights</li> <li>• Offering a friendly deal</li> </ul>	Satisfying the customer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obligation</li> <li>• Reciprocal acts</li> </ul>
	Salesperson acts based on interpretation of customer's actions and reactions in interaction (customer uncertainty)	Improving customer situations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explaining problems</li> <li>• Doing quick fixes</li> <li>• Relieving customer of trouble</li> </ul>	Defining customer problems & Keeping up the helper image <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer dependency</li> </ul>
Not explicit in acts and reactions	Salesperson acts do not seem to be an obvious reaction to the customer's actions in the interaction but influenced by routines and imagination	Reducing customer workloads <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking on work responsibilities</li> <li>• Doing small favors</li> <li>• Managing projects</li> </ul>	Differentiating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being indispensable</li> </ul>
	Salesperson acts based on what they imagine to create value for the customer (Internal interactions)	Looking after customer relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guarding customer interests</li> <li>• Making colleagues care</li> <li>• Preventing trouble</li> </ul>	Securing customer relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security</li> </ul>

## On Research Quality

While some researchers argue that the criteria of reliability and validity are equally relevant for qualitative research (Clavarino, Najman & Silverman, 1995), I will use the terminology for the discussion of research quality that other researchers have provided, taking a more interpretive or constructivist perspective on the generation of knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Charmaz, 2006; Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010).

A very important aspect, even more so in research of an explorative, inductive nature is the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 2000) or credibility (Charmaz, 2006) of the research. The following questions serve as good guidance for evaluating the credibility of my research:

- Has your research achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic? And do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations? (Charmaz, 2006)
- Has your research provided enough evidence for your claims to allow the reader to form an independent assessment – and agree with your claims? (Charmaz, 2006; Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010)
- How well does the study give fair accounts of the voices of all participants of the study? Or how well does the critical scrutiny of the study participants, the scientific community and other stakeholders pass muster? (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010)

Being inspired by Blumer's symbolic interactionist perspective, I have also tried to follow what he calls the naturalistic inquiry which he describes as the study of processes as they happen in the

'everyday existence of people - in the interaction of people as they associate in their daily lives, as they engage in the variety of activities needed to meet the situations that confront them in their day-to-day existence' (Blumer, 1980:124)

Hence, a considerable empirical richness, immersing myself in the study setting as much as possible has been the intention with the study and the consequence of the research process as described before. Not only did the process give me enough time to learn about the company, the industry and the practice of selling sequentially, and process the contextual knowledge but it also allowed me to

immerse myself in the practice of selling with the research subjects again and again until I felt that my ability to find new and interesting aspects had been saturated. Given the different sources and possibilities to gather contextual knowledge as elaborated before I am rather confident in my familiarity with the topic, of course relative to what a researcher can hope to achieve given the restrictions. The possibility to record as much as possible and to take extensive field notes as a non-participating observer in the different interactions provided me with rich material of which I tried to use as much as I considered necessary to support my claims. Finally, through the different contacts that I made at varying stages in my research process, I could discuss some first insights and conclusions that I derived in the meantime during conversations with different stakeholders. Moreover, the nature of shadowing allows my perceived observations to be paralleled and contrasted with the perceptions of the salespeople who often explain or reflect on their actions throughout the day. Finally, my observations and conclusions have been the subject of discussions with different stakeholders in the case company, for example area sales management in Germany, country management in Germany and HQ management in Brussels.

A second aspect is the usefulness of the research (Charmaz, 2006). This pragmatic or action-oriented criterion evaluates knowledge on whether one can take action on it and whether it produces desired effects (Kvale, 1995). This is in line with the idea that research needs to have an enhancing effect on the level of sophistication ability of participants to take action based on the results (Lincoln, 1990). The study aimed to generate local and contextual understanding (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). The local knowledge does not detract from the details and the complexities and inconsistencies that practitioners are facing in their day-to-day work. Hence, whereas the study does not aim to tell managers what they should do in the form of prescriptive knowledge, I still consider it as highly relevant for practitioners as it provides a framework for a differentiated and sophisticated understanding of value creation in sales interactions.

The detailed local knowledge provided by this study is already considered as an original contribution not only to practice but also to theory thanks to the access and detailed empirical insight that is rare in this particular theoretical field and profession. While this is important as such, local knowledge could still contribute to understanding other related contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or generic processes (Charmaz, 2006) through analytical inference (Järvensivu &

Törnroos, 2010) or theoretical generalization (Watson, 2001) and therewith contribute to the theoretical usefulness and the originality of the research (Charmaz, 2006). As Watson (2001) in his study on managers argues, there are distinctive characteristics of every organization and hence the work within it, but there are certain intrinsic patterns or processes that permeate them all. Watson continues stating that underlying the individual uniqueness and cultural variation are basic social and psychological processes that an individual is engaged with. Based on the ‘sociological and political-economic continuities’ (2001:xiii) it is possible to relate the particular to the general, and hence generalize on the level of process and theory. Through constant comparison of the interactions and codes that I have used to define the interactions I not only have interpreted what is happening in the sales interactions but also tried to find more conceptual or theoretical renderings that identify the underlying social processes in the idiosyncrasy of the respective interactions.

Finally, I would like to cite an example that Watson (2001) gives of analytical generalization on the basis of processes and theory:

‘... some managers offending others by writing ‘curt memoranda or electronic mail messages, rather than explaining decisions face-to-face’. If one were foolish enough to try to generalize empirically about this, one would say that managers generally will be offended if they receive decisions which affect them from other managers in the form of brief and ‘to the point’ written communications. But this would indeed be foolish. (...) One might thus generalize that the form in which managers communicate with each other, in light of the political dimension of managerial relationships, always has the potential to create emotional reactions or exacerbate existing conflicts. A generalizable insight is being offered, suggesting that the form of communication between managers is not a neutral or technical matter: the medium as well as the message has significance for the receiver. (...)’ (xiv)

# Chapter Five - Setting the Stage

In order to get an idea of what has been the non-standardized market setting in my study, this chapter serves to explain the single case company and the industry or market it is operating in. Just as I have familiarized myself with the context of my research subjects in order to understand and make sense of their actions, I want to set the stage to give the reader a similar means for understanding the salespeople's work and their interactions with the customer. Besides the context, this chapter also serves to present the protagonists in this study. Even though the study follows the tradition of symbolic interactionism focusing on activities rather than people, I consider these people and their views on their work as interesting. Furthermore, this knowledge puts the protagonists' accounts of their respective working methods and my interpretations of these people's interactions with other players in their environment in a clearer perspective.

## Company Context

*This chapter presents the packaging business unit of Svenska Cellulosa Aktiebolaget (SCAP) that has today been acquired by DS Smith Packaging (1.7 billion Euros) with the facts and figures of its position when the research was been conducted, that is from 2009 through 2011. DS Smith Plc. is an international supplier of recycled packaging for consumer goods with a turnover of 3.1 billion Euros, employing over 12 000 people. With the purchase of SCAP, DS Smith Plc. aims to become Europe's leading supplier of recycled packaging for consumer goods.*

SCA Packaging, the second largest producer of corrugated board, has 175 production sites (in 25 countries) within Europe. In 2010 their net sales were 2.5 billion Euros (27% of SCA Group sales, 15 200 employees, 10% market share) and an operating profit of 117 million Euros. Historically, the company

grew within Europe through acquisitions, which is the reason for the very decentralized structure, with a European headquarters (HQ), and five entirely autonomous regions (Germany/Switzerland, Nordic, West, South & Central Europe). The company legacy is a heavy manufacturing base but in order to escape the commodity trap and become 'world-class', the HQ launched in 2007 a European-wide marketing and sales transformation theme that was to make the organization a market-oriented full-service packaging provider. In this way, SCA Packaging aims to increase their margin in a very fragmented commodity market that only grows 2-3% annually and where the capacity of the five biggest producers accounts for 45%.

The premises of the transformation theme are to differentiate the offering, to create increasing value for the customer and to form long and lasting partnerships with strategic customers. The main focus is on the change in selling behavior from a product-based approach to solution-based selling in order to increase effectiveness. The wide product portfolio of SCAP, as a result of diversified acquisitions in the different countries is one of the reasons why the solution-selling approach was attractive to this company. SCAP management, however, has realized that there is much to be done for the sales force to change to a value-based or solution-selling approach.

## **The selling ideal**

The European management has designed a 7-step sales process that aims to make selling more effective: 1. Market insights (Segment), 2. Customer insights, 3. Develop solution, 4. Present solution, 5. Negotiation, 6. Implement, 7. Develop. In order to improve the way salespeople identify customers' needs, the management has encouraged and initiated a SPIN selling training program. SPIN is the abbreviation for situation, problem, implication and need questions that the salespeople learn to ask in order to clarify the customer's problem and indicate it to him or her (Rackham, 1988). One specific focus is on the communication of values. The notion behind the training and presentations is to move from talking about services and benefits of a solution, to calculating and communicating its monetary value for the customer. The thought behind this is that by making them more aware of the created value, the customers are likely to have an increased value perception and pay a better price.

The European headquarters refers to the concept of consultative selling to describe the desired sales approach that they would like the salespeople to adopt. The salesperson should be an advisor for the customer and start with the customer's problem rather than with the company's possibilities.

'If we say we are a full-service packaging provider, it means we do consultative selling. It also means that you have to be able to design independently of the material and the factories, and it means it should be easy internally to get access to all our resources and facilities.' (European Sales Manager, SCAP)

These country managers have slightly different ideas about what a salesperson of a full-service provider should do. In the German organization that uses the term value selling, one of the main aspects seems to be the strategic and structured approach to the job. This means that salespeople should, rather than taking the easy-to-get customers, consider the customer's approach and situation and decide whether they can create value for them.

'The successful ones choose specific customers, where they know that they can create value and think about how to do it. Once they get their foot in the door, they maintain the good performance, also by communicating it inside the own company.' (National Sales Manager, SCAP Germany)

Salespeople not only need to think about how they can create value for the customer, but also connect the solution possibilities for the customer's problem with the production possibilities of the own company. This does not only entail understanding the customer's processes, but also being well-informed of the production possibilities and the different stakeholders in the customer company.

'Of course good product knowledge belongs to it, but it is more the knowledge about the links and connections. So it is more than knowing how corrugated is produced but rather to understand the customer processes.' (Area Sales Manager, SCAP Germany)

And:

'He understands the requirements and optimization on all different levels, and can connect areas. (...) He then needs to separate out these issues and connect them with the SCAP complexity, the services, products, etc. He has to combine everything and fit it into a little package for the customer.' (Sales Manager, SCAP Germany)



Even though the Austrian sales organization is following the same vision, the sales manager of Austria thinks that it is the individual's personality and communicative capabilities above all that are important:

'The salesperson needs to be flexible in his personality, like a chameleon, so that he can communicate with the worker on the shop floor just as well as with the manager... We can only differentiate through personality. We all have the same machines and production possibilities. Personal access is the most important to get the information needed. I would say you have to make the customer your friend.' (Sales Manager, SCAP Austria)

Other employees who feel that the social aspect plays a less important role, however, oppose this position.

'Many of our customers are big brands that want high quality products. They have young people who have just graduated and want to test their performance in the purchasing positions, and give them ambitious cost-saving targets. Also, whenever there are centralized purchasing departments it gets really tough.' (Marketing Manager, SCAP Austria)

## Sales Organizations

SCAP Germany has 20 locations, 2 300 employees and an EBIT of 493 million Euros (2010). The German market has, compared with the other SCAP countries, the lowest packaging prices. It is, nevertheless, the biggest and one of the most profitable markets for SCAP. Despite fierce competition in the corrugated business it retained an average growth rate of 3% within the last five years (up to 2009) and with 11.4% market share it is the second biggest player on the German market. Whereas the set-up of Germany, including Switzerland, represents a SCAP region of its own, SCAP Austria is part of the SCAP region Central Europe. Hence, SCAP Austria is considerably smaller than SCAP Germany. It has two locations, 140 employees and net sales of 36.6 million Euros (2010). Also in the Austrian market there is tough rather undifferentiated competition. Here, however, SCAP is one of the smaller players holding 8% market share with the market leader at 40% and the followers at 21%, 15% and 10%.

## Germany

SCAP entered the German market in 1993 through acquisition of one of Germany's biggest paper packaging manufacturers in the conventional business PWA (Zewawell), and a family-owned business in Berlin. The entire organization has been decentralized: one plant, one plant manager, and one business. Each plant has been selling their products within a geographical area of 300 kilometers around the plant. At that time, SCAP Germany had mostly been selling conventional corrugated packaging, for example, transport packaging. In 2002 the German organization acquired one more company, Stabernack, in order to expand into the high-end display and consumer packaging business. The product portfolio embraced display and offset printing, higher premium flexo-printing and the family-owned company had a very good customer portfolio covering many brands. This latter acquisition caused trouble in SCAP because it then consisted of two very different sales organizations with regard to structure and culture:

'Stabernack salespeople, were more sales oriented, left thoughts of profit up to the plants, were very customer-oriented but and were lone fighters. The other salespeople from the SCAP side were loyal to their plants that they belonged to, when it produced folding boxes, then they drove through the country to sell folding boxes.' (Sales Manager, SCAP Germany)

In 2009 the structural differences between the two sales organizations have been eliminated by establishing one central organization separate from the plants with the salespeople working on a home office basis. The salaries have been frozen to one level for 12 months and the customers and areas have been allotted to certain salespeople in order to prevent any further overlap and to split the potentials. Each of the 19 plants specializes in a certain area, being conventional box plants, consumer packaging or displays. Each of the plants has a product development center with some designers for the specific plant. Some of them, such as Hanau and Fulda, are established as design centers and have a design force that is independent of a particular plant belonging to the sales organization. The plants are separated from the sales organization in that the plant manager and the internal sales manager are located in the plant, which has the final price decision, and the external salespeople report to the regional sales managers. About 60 salespeople are dispersed within five different geographical sales regions; their area sales managers report to the German sales and marketing director. Apart from the 'normal' account managers who are responsible for a

regionally defined area, there are key account managers who are responsible for certain key customers and strategic account managers who are responsible for one major customer worth between 12 and 16 million Euros turnover. Finally, there is an expert team for special products, e.g. industrial liquid transport, display and creative consultant support, or for logistical and automatization issues. These teams serve as support for the different salespeople on matters they know less about.

Apart from the structural changes many initiatives have been taken specifically within the sales organization. The sales force has been given training since 2009 in value selling and cross selling where the focus has been on developing the strategy to create value for the customer and to increase the salespeople's knowledge of the wide range of products in the portfolio. Moreover, a sales enterprise software serves for planning but also as a feedback tool between salespeople and the company has been introduced. Here, the salespeople not only manage the customer data but also the description and updating of certain projects with customers as well as the maintenance of a value card for each customer (the values that have been provided by the company for the customer). Finally, the different reward systems are all aligned towards a contribution margin rather than volume. The salary consists of 70% fixed and 30% variable depending on the contribution margin as well as individual objectives and the maintenance of the documents in the sales enterprise software.

## **Austria**

In 1998 SCAP started to incrementally increase ownership of the corrugated production company Welpa reaching 100% in 2006, and renamed it SCA Packaging Austria Welpa. There is one production plant with a sales office and a second sales office that mostly cooperates with other production plants in the south of Germany. The Austrian sales organization is thus much smaller than the German one, and the salespeople have an office at the plant. Because of the smaller size, the sales organization tries to satisfy the full-service position by cooperating with other players in the market. These might even be competitors if it means that they can produce formats that SCAP cannot. One cooperation example is with a logistic company that is right next door to the SCAP plant and where one SCAP employee is located in order to streamline the enterprises.

Even though SCAP Austria is considerably smaller than SCAP Germany, the sales manager of Austria has the same responsibilities as the one in Germany, though on a smaller scale. The external sales force consists of three key account managers, four account managers who are geographically dispersed and two account managers who are dedicated only to export to Hungary. Around seven people work in design and another seven in internal sales. The internal sales has always been structured in such a way that one internal salesperson builds a team with one external salesperson. The sales force works with the same system whereby they carry out the planning and write their visit reports. The salespeople report to a central design department manager who assigns the work among the different designers; only bigger customers are taken care of by the same designer.

SCAP Austria strives for *'the long-term transformation of the packaging business to a full-service provider of customer-oriented packaging solutions.'* (Intranet). Customer-orientation, non-standardized packaging solutions, competent and motivated employees as well as high quality print describe their philosophy. One of the reasons why the European management considers the Austrian sales organization still as having a rather transactional sales approach, is that the sales force's variable part of their salary is still oriented towards the turnover and not the contribution margin which signals that the organization is volume focused. In a recent sales meeting of the Austrian sales force, however, the necessity to increase prices has been the main topic.

Some recent initiatives have followed the European headquarters' drive towards solution and full-service selling. The SPIN selling (Rackham, 1988) training program has been carried out. This program promotes a technique of, or approach to sales interaction with the aim of asking different questions in order to clarify problems and improvement possibilities. Moreover, seminars are held, for example, on packaging machines and technology in order to educate the sales force. While the German organization has the resources to have experts to support customers who are asking for packaging machines, the idea in Austria is to train the salespeople so they can provide this 'full-service' through cooperation with machine companies.

# Salespeople

After elaborating on the work context shared by most of the individual salespeople, this chapter provides the different insights and backgrounds of each salesperson. A short presentation of the protagonists tells the reader about each salesperson's responsibilities in the company, their backgrounds and relationships to the customers, and sketches different typical working days.

## Adam

Adam works as key accountant for two major German consumer goods companies. A key accountant is usually responsible for a few customers who require the service of several plants and therefore have the potential for development along the entire portfolio (e.g. cross-selling). Adam has been working for 11 years in SCA Packaging (and Stabernack before the acquisition) as purchaser in internal sales and in project management positions. Before starting in external sales (2009) he held the position of internal sales manager. He trained as industrial manager (Industrie Kaufmann<sup>2</sup>) and became a certified specialist in procurement and logistics (Fach Kaufmann). He has always been interested in the aspects around this, i.e. design, and he got to know much about the technical side and machine data when handling the procurement of investment goods. Adam has the highest average price level with his customers and has average sales in the group of salespeople in the year 2011.

He got the responsibility for customer Ge, a major customer that he already worked with during his time as internal sales employee, after half a year in the external sales job. Usually, there has always been one salesperson dedicated just for customer Ge since this customer has the attitude that the salespeople need to be present at the customer plant to get work projects and requests. About a year later he was assigned to customer Ri, a German family-owned chocolate manufacturer. Even though, Adam admits that this customer has a very good price level and that during that year he managed to increase sales with this customer by 25%, interaction with company Ri seems to present more

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<sup>2</sup> In the German education system, when the first 3 years of work experience in companies are combined with education in business.

challenges for Adam than with company Ge. There are many different parties involved in decisions and if two parties agree the third one has objections.

Adam usually starts his day in the morning by driving to the plant to pick up samples for the customer, chats with those responsible for his customers in internal sales and talks through the display construction with the designer. He then either drives to customer Ge or customer Ri. The driving time alone takes 3-4 hours per day. He combines the time at the plant in the morning to prepare for the day and write the follow-up of the day before, because after 2-3 hours with the customer and the time taken to drive back, he would not reach any of his colleagues in the plant any more that day. He usually gets home around six in the evening and does the desk work necessary to follow up and prepare customer meetings. At customer Ge he never has appointments; he has different people that he meets regularly to follow up certain projects. He says that he is usually there every second day for any of the different projects and even if there is nothing specific to discuss with any of the different contact people, he knows that he usually gets an order or project when he visits the customer. At customer Ri he has prearranged appointments where he usually meets all stakeholders in a project at once.

His customer projects usually span a longer period. At a first briefing the customer transmits his/her ideas to Adam who can make a preliminary suggestion at this meeting. After a brainstorming session, SCAP designers produce a first sample, which often needs to be tested by retailers or production. Throughout this process, the SCAP design center has to work on many changes until the different stakeholders of the customer agree on it. According to Adam's experience, there are projects that work out quicker than expected and others that never seem to get anywhere.

'I do not have a watch. I broke the habit of wearing one. As soon as you have one you look at it and there is nothing worse than sitting with the customer and looking at your watch. The most important thing for the customer is time. I would always try not to have two visits on one day. There are often things to discuss for which the customer needs more time and they need people who have time for it.'

## **Boris**

Boris has a geographic area to cover within the North region North. He has been working in sales for ten years and also worked at Stabernack before the acquisition. His experience from the paper packaging industry date back 25 years where he has worked in internal sales and design positions. Initially he trained as an industrial manager for a paint manufacturer where he also worked as purchaser. Boris gave his entire list of old customers to the boss in order to focus on display sales, which he considers is his strong point. He mentions that his geographical area has low potential, which is confirmed by statistics, because all the headquarters of the bigger companies are located in other areas. He has the lowest sales in the observed group but he has the second highest price level which could be explained by his focus on displays, which are all high-end products.

One the one hand, Boris says that having intuition about the customer is a requirement for good consulting. However, he presents the understanding of the customer's problem as more of an operational process of asking targeted questions and compares it with the doctor's diagnosis of a patient's problem. In the display area he says the customer presents either a very precise idea of a display, or only a rough idea, for example, that it should be creative but cheap. Whereas in the first place he tries to surprise and challenge the customer's existing ideas in order to do something different, in the latter situation he likes to be creative and cuts out paper constructions or draws ideas, often while sitting with the customer. In his experience it is usually the first idea in the customer meeting that is right, and talking about it already in the meeting, the customer can directly influence and shape his idea.

Boris says that he tries to have a wide customer portfolio in order to avoid depending on just a few big customers. This, however, entails the necessity of actively acquiring many customers, because he cannot rely on contacts and word of mouth internally in just one company. Through his focus on display he automatically has to deal with major consumer brand companies allowing for little personal interaction, and these are, in his opinion, harder to work with. Customer Un is one example where Boris has not really managed to get a foot in the door during the last year. He thinks it is one of the best examples of how important the relationship level is because he has no contacts with the marketing people, only through the purchasing manager. He already figured out that if he

only gets an email with a thank you and a rejection, the sample has not been one of the best three, if he gets invited to talk about the samples and to see the chosen one, the sample has been number two or three in the choice.

He mentions that since he has some customers in Hamburg, he leaves his home office early and drives by the Hamburg plant to discuss some things before visiting the customers, or otherwise stays some hours in the afternoon when there are some matters that take more time to discuss. In the morning he checks his emails, does the software update, and talks to a designer about a project for a customer; he usually writes his reports in the evenings. In the discussion with the designer at the plant, she mentions that she is not happy with the sample yet and that she needs some more time. They agree that she finishes it for the next day and sends it directly to the customer so that Boris can arrange a meeting with that customer on the same day when the sample arrives. Boris explains afterwards that he does not want to take the sample in its current state just to meet the deadline because he thinks it is a waste of time, he knows that the customer just looks at the sample and thinks that it is not ready yet. He says he prefers flexible deadlines with the customers to avoid putting the plant or him under stress to finish something at a certain time, *'I do not like this rigid planning, it does not work in the display business'*.

## **Christian**

Christian is strategic accountant and has, apart from two smaller customers, a main one: customer St. He started his sales career 26 years ago at Stabernack, and has held positions such as the area sales manager for northern Germany and he became managing director of a display plant that he had built up. He worked with the machines while he was still salesperson for his customers and area sales manager, managing 4-6 salespeople. With the acquisition by SCAP he went back to being a salesperson 100% of his time. He trained to be an industrial manager in an engineering company. Christian has the second highest sales in the company after David and has a relatively good price level.

He has now been working for over 8 years with customer St and has a very good reputation and wide network in the company. Christian remembers that he started off with the marketing manager as one of the main contacts and has been recommending him internally. Today, his opinion seems to be highly regarded



since he is even invited to be part of a customer internal project group that discusses the options of shelf-ready packaging and he has many different contacts in the company. In his opinion competence to advise the customer and the building of trust are the most important factors. By the latter he means that the customer must be able to rely on the supplier, and that if you promise the customer something, the worst you can do is fail to keep your promise. With regard to competence he knows that everyone works differently, his predecessor approached the customer more 'emotionally', but he was very successful with this style. He knows that he is a different type and that his approach via competent advising works the best for him. The interaction appears very formal and professional, there is hardly any small talk, even with those contacts he has had for several years.

Christian spends most of his working day in the car. He mentions that he used to drive even more when the Hamburg plant had no own designers; he still used to drive to plants further away. Christian works between customer St's marketing in the east of Germany, its main agency in the north and the packaging development in the west. He has to combine and satisfy the requirements of each of the stakeholders for a certain project. Christian mentions that the marketing employees usually do not have much idea about display constructions, so the projects run over a long period of time while the agency and marketing department present preliminary ideas and Christian tries to translate them into a display construction, holding in mind the requirements and possibilities of paper constructions. Christian says that it is sometimes quite hard because it never seems to be right and they have ideas that are unrealistic. After a visit at the plant in Hamburg, where Christian picks up the samples for the presentation he drives to customer St where he builds up the display sample and meets marketing staff. After taking down the display he drives to the agency and later on to the packaging development and goes through the same procedure again.

Christian is very distinct in that he tries to do most of the work himself and relies very little on his internal colleagues. He knows that it is a lot of work and that it is quite problematic:

'...at some point you start having the same expectations of other colleagues that you have of yourself and that does not work. Even if you do it all alone, it only works to a certain limit. It becomes really risky. I was not far from this. It is still a little bit like that today, even though I know it. But it is the belief to be able to

manage all the workload and the feeling to have to do everything right. If you want to do it better than good, then you do not let go and work more and more and the others are not necessarily willing to do that.’

## David

David has, for the past nine years, been strategic account manager for company Ne and makes sales of 19 million Euros with this customer. Customer Ne is the largest consumer packaged goods company in the world. Among their main product categories are baby food, coffee, dairy products, breakfast cereals and confectionary. Since this is more than twice as much sales as an average account manager makes, but still at a good price level, he is considered the top salesperson by the country management. After his studies in business administration he started working for Stabernack where he was employed for several years in internal sales and production before he was allowed to start in an external sales position. He did not particularly like it, but the owner of Stabernack was of the opinion that every salesperson needs to know the business inside out. He started working in a sales position thirteen years ago.

David explains that he has about 150 contacts within customer Ne in Germany of which he has more frequent sessions with 30 or 40 people, mostly from the technical and the marketing department. He says that he has only very little contact with the purchasing department; often they get contacted after the project has reached its final stage. These personal contacts that he has established incrementally over several years are very important to him and require maintenance: *‘It is like a little tree, if you lose it then it is finished, but if you lose one root, you can build up on the next one’*. He mentions that at Christmas the number of contacts is particularly challenging as he sends handwritten personal cards to all of them, and easily spends three to four days doing this. He mentions that customer Ne offered him a desk of his own for working space, but he decided against it because he thinks that the most important conversations take place out in the corridor.

The variety of meetings between contacts with customer Ne and David do not give the impression that much of his work is routine. It appears that only parts of a meeting could be prepared beforehand since many of the customer’s problems come up during the conversation requiring him to provide ad-hoc answers or ideas for potential solutions to the problem. There appears to be no

time to look things up, he gets asked for what he thinks is possible and he often needs to reach a decision right away. David appears to be multi-tasking, taking notes while he is talking, and reshaping the samples by hand in order to understand the customer's ideas and show his own solutions.

David says that he leaves every morning at 6.30 to drive to the design center in Fulda or Hanau to pick up samples for his projects (at that time there is usually no designer or internal sales at the plant), and then he drives to customer Ne. While he is there he has easily four to five different projects to be discussed with those in charge and these are mostly previously arranged meetings. Thus, after up to four hours he leaves company Ne with the follow-up work for about five projects. Depending on how clear the tasks for these projects are, and what else there is to discuss, he drives back to the plants (Fulda or Hanau), to check how things are going with his internal sales and discusses projects with his designers. By then it is 4 p.m. and he drives home to work there with the follow-up and preparations, such as reports and to think about solutions to the customer's questions.

About his work, he mentions that even if good salespeople are probably greedy and amass a lot of money, he thinks this is justified since, *'you have to work your ass off, and you cannot be egoistic because you need to do everything for others and not think of yourself'*. He quotes his former boss who told him that he can only do this job if he gets used to some things: the first thing is that no-one owes him anything, that everyone thinks he earns too much money, that he is lazy and drives a fat car. Further, his boss said that he will never get a reward for anything, success is always for other people, if he can live with not having any success in other people's eyes but to always get blamed if something goes wrong, then he could do the job. From his own experience he says that the job is always stressful, but that the stress is only real if the sales figures are not right over a longer period of time. He says that he has to fight a lot, because he has to make so much possible for the customer internally in his own company.

## Edward

Edward is responsible for a geographical region in Germany and his main customers are in the pharmacy and nutrition industry. He is a trained packaging mechanic and has worked in different companies mostly in the paper packaging industry. In addition he has trained as a technician in that area, followed by a fairly business oriented career in customer care and has a BA in Business Administration. He has only worked for two years at SCAP, so he started after the centralization of the sales force. Previously, he worked at a medium sized packaging company for two years. He liked the work at the company before, because he could see a lot of advantages with mid-sized companies, but he was looking for a challenge and found it in SCAP's wider portfolio and production facilities. Altogether he has been working in external sales for 10 years. Relative to his colleagues, Edward has a good sales quota, and with regard to price level he is below the upper half.

Edward seems to have a fairly social and casual contact with the customers he visits. With both customers he spends a fair bit of the time talking about private issues. However, the rest of the conversations are always very technical. One of his former customers contacted him a year after he changed his job, and asked him to come by. Since then they have worked on several projects together. It became apparent afterwards that customer Tu contacted Edward because they were not happy with the former supplier any more after Edward left. Edward either brought samples or was dealing with existing samples and improvements in the packaging. He says that his motto is to provide service and always make things a little bit different but this requires constant follow-up and continuous work with the customer. He says that he enjoys especially the new things and technical details, and is proud to see that there is a new packaging that he has implemented with SCAP.

'You have to have fun with people, and like packaging, you have to live it to a certain extent. Especially the new developments and technical detail are what I enjoy most. Then I am proud to see a packaging that SCAP has developed and that I implemented.'

He seems to approach his work in a very structured manner and tries to prioritize as much as possible, decide which direction to take and which to avoid. Edward seems very meticulous about writing the reports for the meetings; he says he usually writes them on the same day and issues clear tasks to each

internal employee. His working days seem to vary; whereas on one day he has three customer meetings, on another day there can be just one meeting and one that comes up spontaneously during the day. On another occasion he has initiated an internal meeting at a SCAP plant. The plant colleagues mentioned that one of Edward' main customers has often been dissatisfied and Edward wants to prevent bad supplier evaluation from this customer. At this meeting with the plant manager, the designer, internal sales and a quality manager, Edward wants to talk about measures that are taken for the prevention of dissatisfaction so that he can pass them on to the customer but also to listen to the employees' complaints about the customer's claims.

## **Fred**

Fred is responsible for a geographical area in the north of Germany with mostly manufacturing customer companies. Fred trained as an industrial manager (Industriekaufmann) where he had a lot to deal with the salespeople and was always curious about their work. After his first job in the packaging for fruit and vegetables he switched to the corrugated industry where he first worked for SCAP's main competitor and then moved to SCAP about four years ago. Fred falls into the lower half of the observed salespeople with regard to sales performance and price level.

For Fred the social and commercial aspects of a customer conversation seem the most important. In most situations the customer presented the specific idea of certain packaging, the necessity of a machine or the required supply. He would offer the customer to optimize the packaging design, but not necessarily suggest any new ideas of his own. He does not seem to have any particular technical know-how about the product and production and says himself that such knowledge is not all that important and that he does not have the time to learn all those things:

'I don't think the knowledge about the product is the most important, it is part of the job, you need to know a little bit but that is not the most important. You have to look to see where can you achieve something better and maybe try through comments, like for example, "Are you sure this will hold? I would rather not try this out." You have to have a mixture of that.'

The days with Fred have been very busy with customer visits. As he mentions later to me, a day without a customer visit is an unproductive one. He seems to fill out his day as much as possible; he plans around three customer meetings and uses the time in between for work on the computer. He admits, and other colleagues also mentioned this about him, that he packs his day full without any break and even checks his mail with his computer on the passenger seat. He does most of his planning in the car, where he tries to set up meetings and gives updates to internal sales. In the five days I have spent with Fred, many different customer interactions have been observed. Some of them have been rather short visits for a price discussion. In order to avoid just sending a new price list by post to the customer, Fred visits them personally, brings along some printouts explaining the raw material situation and the price increase for paper.

Fred thinks that it is important to make a good impression within the first 10 minutes, and not be perceived as unfriendly: *'If I am already a bit unlikeable or unappealing than I already know I won't get there, only unless with a lower price.'* He explains that you have to create a personal relationship during the meetings with the customer since there are not many people any more who have time for socializing: *'There you have to gain points with the customer and make sure that he feels in good hands, that he knows for sure that it works out, that he can rely on it.'* Fred thinks that one should talk with customers more about private social matters than about business. *'There might be some who do not want that but mostly it is not desirable to just go in 10 minutes and run through the program. Everything around is quite essential.'*

## Oscar

Oscar is responsible for a geographical area in the southern region. He has a very mixed customer portfolio with the biggest customer, a major tobacco company, where he sells the conventional brown transport packaging. He worked at Zewawell when SCAP acquired it and has been working in a sales position within the paper packaging industry for 30 years. He studied business administration before starting in sales. Oscar has one of the lowest sales performances and is in the lower half with regard to the price level.

A typical day for Oscar seems to consist of several rather short customer visits (30 minutes) where business or small talk takes up a considerable amount of the time. Oscar talks often about the conversational part of an interaction, that he sometimes feels that he misjudges the situation and asks too much or too little. He compares it with a private relationship, where it is also all about trying to find a win-win situation together: *'A meeting does not take place if one party has no interest at all. And if it happens, usually the common goal can be found.'* Some meetings also serve the purpose of staying in touch or trying to check if the situation for the customer has changed, for example, with regard to supply contracts and products that might be open for tender again. In these meetings, it is either a matter of gathering information from the customer, getting a feeling for future sales possibilities or presenting the own company.

For three days he is on the road and two days he usually works in the home office, where he does the weekly report of visits and fills out other documents in the sales enterprise software, or he might do certain extra tasks for the current training and preparation of his annual discussion with the supervisor. Oscar says that these extra administrative tasks have increased and therefore changed his way of working. He says that more planning affects specifically the ratio of time that is spent with the customer to time spent for preparation and follow-up for the customer. Throughout the day he tries to check his mails and make phone calls with customers.

'For phone calls with the customers it is usually too late in the evenings, and it is too inflexible to cram them into the days when I am in the office, so I drive to a parking lot and arrange these things throughout the day'.

The customer visits are chiefly with purchasing managers, and in general, the meetings are either for following up on a missing order or for getting a repeat order. An example of a visit is to a potential customer that produces teas for organic shops. The company does not need that much transport packaging because most of it is in plastic bags, but some of the flavoring material falls into the dangerous goods category which is why Oscar collaborates with the dangerous goods expert within SCAP. These articles are currently delivered by a competing company, but Oscar explains that the purchaser told him that he would like to give SCAP a change in the area of dangerous goods, since he was not that satisfied with the current supplier. Oscar and the expert have been in touch with the purchaser every now and then during the last year but the purchaser has never contacted them regarding the potential offer. Now it is

about half a year ago and Oscar wants to make a new offer to the customer and hear how things are going: '*... I just wanted to be there once more now and see what the situation is*'.

Oscar considers his task is to communicate benefits to the customer and to find out what the customer needs. He says that the salesperson 'is so to say the intermediary, to manage two sides of requirements, to find out about the customer and the internal possibilities'. He thinks that it would not hurt to offer the portfolio to the customer not knowing what exactly he/she needs, the only problem he sees is that the customer could think that SCAP is too expensive, because it is offering all these things that he/she does not need.

## **George**

George is responsible for one of the biggest geographical areas in northern Germany. Most of his customers are in the food industry, for example farmers for fruit and vegetables. He has worked for SCAP for ten years in external sales and had before the merger with Stabernack an area sales manager position. He has a BA in business administration and started work in a small packaging business where he learned the manufacturing and printing of boxes. He worked there for four years within internal and external sales and purchasing. Before starting at SCAP he worked at several smaller competitors of SCAP. With regard to the sales figures, George is in the upper half of the sales group, his price level, however, is one of the lowest.

As a rule, George's customer meetings appear more commercial than technical which is most likely due to the product range that George sells. His stories are often about good deals, such as with one customer where he made the conventional packaging cheaper in order to get an offset packaging project on which he could get a better margin. Another story is about one customer that asked for the supply of a standard packaging and George said right away that he would prefer to take on a new product rather than quoting on the existing product. George says that it was risky because the customer could just as well have answered that he need not come back at all, but instead he said that this could take some time. The next time, they met for a coffee and George presented some SCAP products; he went home with a design project from the customer. George says that it is hard to do something different because he needs



the right contacts at the customer. He explains that if he said that he sells packaging and wants to talk to marketing they would not let him, but if he says, 'I have seen your packaging in the market and maybe I have some possible approaches for improvement', then that might work. But he admits that it is risky because the customer could feel criticized and even insulted over their previous purchase of packaging that was not absolutely up to par.

According to George the current period is unusually calm. He mentions that it feels almost strange because no one calls. But he is not too stressed because it might be because of the increased price of paper and that no customer wants to 'wake him up'. He does not mind having some time to breathe, as long as the figures are OK, but in the long run, he says it would not make him happy. George mentions that he used to get up at five in the morning and also worked in the evening for an hour or so in the office. But he says that it became too much and now he thinks that it is better to do 3-5 projects properly than ten at once. He prefers working early in the mornings, writing reports, checking his sales figures and mails. And in the evening he only checks the order receipts that they get sent from the plant. Knowing that he has to sell every day about 10 000 square meters, he does his own performance checks: *'Maybe I have a little tic that way, but I live with numbers, you have to know where you stand'*. George plans his day partly also according to the size of the customers. He is developing his customer portfolio to have about 15 customers around 5000-1.5 million Euro turnover.

'I would not want to drive to a customer with 3000 Euro and afterwards to someone with 1.5 million Euro turnover. It is tough to manage the transit. If you lose one customer with 2 million Euro turnover that is already bad, but with customers beyond that one is too dependent.'

At some point he says that he used to be much more 'wild' in his interaction with internal colleagues, he was pushing them to do what he wants them to do, *'I thought everything breaks down when I started at SCAP, they put up my gibbet in every plant'*. He wanted the designers to realize that if he says that he needs something right away, he really means it. When they told him that they need 8 hours to produce a sample, he could tell them that it can be done in four because he knows how to do it. They realized this and he released the pressure after half a year: *'I use the carrot and stick trick. I am a bit cleverer now, I bring doughnuts and things, then they do everything'*.

## Hans

Hans is the key accountant for several customers in the southern region. He has worked for 25 years in the packaging industry and started at Zewawell before SCAP acquired it. He worked there for 10 years in internal sales, and during the last four years he was in charge of the biggest geographical area where he already started having external sales contact because many customers were located around the plant and they liked to take the opportunity to ask him to come by. He had to start earlier than expected in external sales because the external salesperson left, so he had to manage the external sales as well as the training of his internal sales colleague. He is happy about it now because he could arrange matters, as he wanted. Of his 15 years of external sales experience, he worked eight years in a key accountant position. The current customers are to 90% industrial goods companies; however, he aims to build up more in the area of displays and promotional packaging. He has a fairly low sales performance and a poor price level in comparison with the rest of the group. This seems surprising because his attitude, his stories and his potential career path indicate that he embraces the SCAP ideas of value selling.

Hans thinks that it is important to have time for creativity during the day; if pressed for time, the easier way always seems to be the best. But the salesperson, in his view, needs to think through the customer and not make things too standardized. He explains that when time is short salespeople often send the samples by post, but then the customer remembers what he was prepared to pay for it in the first place and if the price increases, the salesperson would not have the opportunity to explain the thoughts and advantages behind the packaging. Hans tells several stories in which the customer bought the packaging at a price that exceeded what they were initially willing to pay. They just produce two designs - one embracing all the ideas that the customer wants which also cost more and one that is the best possible sample at the price that the customer wants to pay. Usually the customer takes the one that is more expensive but solves the problem in a better way.

Hans seems to have very friendly interactions with all his customers, but he does not seem to have one or two major customers that he works with. During the three days I was with him he has visited six different customers. Some interactions were really short where only samples were dropped off accompanied by a short discussion, or samples from a competitor were picked up to make a

material test. Hans says that he prefers to arrange few fixed meetings in order to stay flexible. He has some contacts where it is good enough to say he can come sometime in the afternoon, and these meetings he can keep more flexible.

After the customer visits he drives home or to the plant in Nurnberg to do some deskwork. He is one of the few salespeople that still have an office because he is regularly at the plant. When there was a space of free time during the day, he pulled out his laptop and wrote emails or a report. Hans says that he spends one to two days in the office or at his home office because there are so many extra tasks in addition to the usual work. He is not happy about having to write so many reports: *'I already have 60 working hours, if I then have to invest even more time, I am reluctant. But OK, apparently it has been discussed and that is how it is now.'* He mentions that he always used to take very careful notes during the meetings and at once assigned responsibilities in his notes, which he then scanned in and sent around, now he has to use a predefined template for a report.

The fact that Hans is a key accountant means that he has more project type customer meetings, for example, when he takes the multi-material expert with him. One situation is when they met a salesperson from a folding box company to talk through the option of cooperating so that SCAP can provide full service to the customer. The folding box production is not part of SCAP's portfolio; in order to offer full service or solutions, they need to cooperate with an external part. Another situation has been when he accompanied a colleague to a potential new customer, LM, as a responsible person for a new innovation. Hans has tried to learn more about different product areas, such as display and consumer packaging, that he has not worked with before the acquisition of Stabernack. Now he that has gained more experience of this, he feels more comfortable with these types of product and enjoys the kind of interaction he has with the customer through this new knowledge:

*'I have lost the fear for these things, it is fun to work with other people, the people from marketing are different, they have their budget that they can spend and the design is really important so you can spend one or two cents more.'*

## Jacob

Jacob is responsible for a geographical region in the north of Germany that embraces mostly food industries. He covers the biggest part of one of the main plant's production in terms of quantity of perforated corrugated packaging. He has been working as a salesperson for SCAP for 12 years and in the corrugated industry for 22 years. He started working as a salesman 32 years ago in the cosmetic industry for a German cosmetics brand. His first job in the corrugated industry was with a competitor where he sold paper for three years. After that he moved to a bigger company where he could, in addition to his sales job, also learn about general business administration. Jacob does not necessarily have the smallest sales, especially not when estimated in m2 of sold products, however, he has one of the smallest profit margins.

During all the visits it was striking to observe the personal contact that Jacob had with his customers, partly because of the ratio of social talk to business issues but also the atmosphere in general. As one of the first topics in the conversation with Jacob, he brings up the fact that he likes to build up a personal relationship with his customers. He is on first-name terms with the decision makers of 6-7 main customers. He has three really good contacts with whom he goes out for meals in the evenings. He invites many customers to the Christmas market or to a football game and he also thinks that if possible the wives should be involved because it creates a different level of contact. On these occasions, Jacob reckons to get information such as competitor prices. But he also thinks that once he has the personal contact to customers they expect more of him. He admits that it is also exhausting before Christmas to have so many evening meals with important contacts because it puts constraints on his private life. He remembers that last year it was a matter of 12 Christmas dinners:

‘Ok, it is self-inflicted injury but it is how I see sales and it helps if you get, for example, claims. With regard to prices I have with almost every customer a last call<sup>3</sup>. I will continue doing it that way.’

When Jacob talks about his work he says that usually he gets a request from a customer for a packaging and he asks for the competitor sample (the packaging that has been delivered before) in order to do a quality test because the quality

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<sup>3</sup> A last call is when the customer indicates a salesperson that his or her price is too high after the customer has received all offers from other competing suppliers.

norms can be very different. Then SCAP quotes on this packaging that either has an attractive price for the customer or not. However, Jacob prefers interactions that are a challenge and require more thinking on the technical side, where he has nothing to lose and can test the limits. He mentions one time when the purchaser came to him and showed him a 4-point glued packaging that he really liked. Since the salesperson preferred not to send it to another SCAP plant, which would mean transport costs, he tried, together with the designer at the plant, to come up with a solution. Jacob says that this was a situation where everything just worked out in a win-win situation because he could get a better price and the customer saved money on handling costs.

Jacob had to cancel and change several customer meetings because one of his customers, Ho, had an urgent problem since his customer had introduced certain alterations that might have meant changing the entire production, and SCAP had already partly started on it. Another example of a meeting is with the purchasing manager of a family-owned dairy business, customer Na. He mentions that he also knows the plant manager because they both have a boat in the Netherlands and privately they are on first-name terms. He even considers this relationship as the only reason why customer Na still buys from SCAP. He explains that during the last year, 8 out of 10 deliveries were claims because of material problems. For seven weeks, he visited this customer 2-3 times every week.

Finally, Jacob often takes assignments for printing proofs for the customers, and he sees this as a skill or service that makes him more or less indispensable. Over the years he has become relatively well skilled in the technical side of printing and in making printing proofs. He says that one needs to grow up with it. He was asked several times to go along with colleagues to teach them but he says that many employees are not interested and if they are, then they come along once and afterwards they are expected to know all about it because of time pressure.

‘They think that I am crazy taking on this job but I see it differently, it is a way to make me more indispensable. It is always the question: how much do you want to do? If I were to say I am only a salesperson this is not my job then other internal people could be doing it. It is not that I am the only one in the plant who knows how to do the printing proofs, there are people who are much better, but the customer usually does not know how to do it.’

## Karl

Karl is responsible for a big geographical region in Austria and has about 200 customers. He has been working for SCAP for 8 years in sales. Previously, he worked in purchase and sales with a customer of SCAP, a packaging merchant that was a supplier to furniture companies. Karl is the only salesperson among his colleagues who has no technical education but a business one. He makes about half as much sales as the Austrian key accountant and is in the range of the other regional account managers; however, he manages to have the best average price level with all customers.

Karl usually has five to six customer visits per day, two to three of them are fixed appointments and the rest are more spontaneous: *'You should always have a bit of capacity free, I just got another three calls from wineries that need boxes. They wait until the last minute and then they call.'* He estimates that a day with so many customer visits usually entails an additional three hours of administration work: *'We now get the samples, for which we need to arrange the quotes, that means I need to talk to the designer, to internal sales and write the reports. And then all the other things that happen during the day.'* Karl is usually once or twice a day at the plant either in the evening after all the visits in order to talk through the upcoming tasks, or the next morning, when the situation arises that not everything could be managed on the same day. As opposed to the German sales people, the Austrian ones still have a structural link to the plant, since they have their offices there. Most of them are located in fairly close vicinity to the plant, so they are in the office at least every second day. When he gets back to the plant in the afternoon, and the sales manager is still there, he usually also drops by the office and gives a short briefing of the day's events. He says that this is the usual routine.

Karl seems to either have a very good relationship with the customers he meets or he has at least a very personal approach to the customer. Karl makes with his two biggest customers, a BYO store chain and a pharmaceutical company, about 1/3 of his entire sales, the rest are several middle to smaller sized customers. Otherwise, Karl has several smaller customers, especially within the agriculture and food industry, for example wine, juice, liquors. With these customers, Karl has a very good personal relationship, since they are family-owned businesses where the contact people have been the same over the years and seem to appreciate continuity with their contact person and the personal relationship

and service. Karl has several customers where SCAP is the single supplier, however, these are often smaller businesses.

‘I know that no one else will ever deliver packaging there; I have supplied them with packaging forever. (...) He is a safe customer, he is like a bank, I can plan him into my budget year after year, and the price is also good. I have no idea what would need to happen if someone else was given a chance.’

About his job he says:

‘If you can use more of your experience and change things it is more fun, and of course our product is included in many processes. We can see how it can be integrated better into the customer process. We only need to change the paper material and it would change the position on the pallet and hence, decrease the customer’s transport costs. But if I am not inside a customer it is really tough to improve anything, unfortunately the first entry is almost always by means of the price, then you can try to improve the existing packaging.’

## Marcus

Marcus is one of the two key accountants in Austria and hence is in charge of customers with a purchasing volume of around 100 000 Euro and more, and the products might need to be supplied by several plants. He has worked for 31 years at SCAP and for 20 years in sales. Before he had worked in design and learned the technical side of packaging. He says that he has been working for over 20 years in the sales job, but at heart he is still a technician, and that is what he likes doing. As one of the key accountants he makes about twice as much sale as his other colleagues, however this does not mean that the customers all have a good price level.

Marcus says that he has had most of his customers over a longer period; his contact people at the customer are mostly not purchasing managers, but either product managers or responsible employees for logistics or manufacturing. One of the meetings, however, has been with a new customer, a farmer needing transport boxes. Marcus reflects on the situation afterwards. He says that no training ever tells you how to handle this kind of situation. The customer has no time to sit down, they do everything in passing by, Marcus can often not present the company, and the customer just says, *‘You have that tray and I need that tray’*. It is important for the customer but not important enough to spend more

time on the issue. Marcus says that in these situations he also has no chance to get to sit down with this new customer. He says that while training can help to remind the salesperson how to find the customer's *'bone'* or *'hook'*, that the salesperson can use to start a conversation, he thinks that it does not help when trying to convey a selling technique:

'The customer does not want to have ideas imposed on them. (...) I cannot tell them it needs to be yellow, I need to get them to think that yellow is nicer than red. (...) You cannot sell according to a scheme.'

Marcus says that he has mostly fixed meetings for current issues and tries otherwise to be flexible enough to be able to visit a customer within 48 hours when he/she has any problem. He seems to organize many of the customer meetings on the same day, since he gets many calls from customers that need to see him about different matters. He says that it is always a challenge to organize and align everything. The initial rough day plan is usually complemented throughout the day. He says that he usually has more than four visits a day, but it depends on the tour, and how long he has to drive around. He has hardly ever a whole day in the office, only if he has 2-3 days when he is at customer visits from morning to evening, and then he needs a day in the office to follow up. Since it is often too late to meet his internal colleagues at the end of the day when he gets back, he usually drops into the office on the next morning. About his work he says:

'Operations has strict guidelines, there is a corrugated sheet that needs to be worked on. He knows in the morning what he has to do for the day. It is very different in sales. I cannot sit down and say "What is the day going to bring?". I need to sit down, think about what I need to do and how tomorrow will be. I need to look out for work myself. I might get parallel calls, that is the routine, but I need to see that I move forward, we need to motivate ourselves.'

## Nils

Nils is an Austrian salesperson, very recently employed for the northern region in Austria. He has only been working a few months for SCAP but has about 10 years of experience in the corrugated paper industry. He trained to be a printer and worked for 2.5 years in printing preparation, after that he worked two years in the packaging design and has won two national prizes for his designs. He has worked four years in external sales at one of the major competitors in the



industry. The geographical area he is covering has not had a salesperson from SCAP in the last years; however, SCAP's analysis says that there is a lot of industry and potential in this area. Nils explains that so far there are three main competitors that are settled with a plant in this area, which is why he sees it as quite challenging now to enter as a fourth packaging supplier and acquire customers.

Nils' day is mostly taken up with acquisition of new customers. He says that he has lists of customers from former salespeople, so he knows of all the customers that have at some point been supplied by SCAP, and he then searches for all the ones with the area code for his region. Otherwise he has an Excel list on his computer downloaded from a business CD that does industry analyses, which he got from a former colleague. There he can look up all customers in one area, and search for industries, for any manufacturing company. Then he makes a call, presents himself, and asks if they currently use or order paper packaging/boxes, and if so asks if he can drop by to have a look. He also tries to activate some old customers that he used to work with in his previous employment. Nils says that his manager wants him to find customers that are not only price-conscious buyers, but he says that it is easier said than done, because if he gets to a customer where he does not supply yet and says that he is the optimizer, then the customer would say they already have one.

One of the old contacts from his previous job with the competing firm that he now visits is customer AZ, a component supplier for Porsche. Nils first drives to the bakery to get some bread rolls, *'He said that he needed some breakfast when he has to see me (grinning)'*. Nils says that he knows the customer quite well and used to be in a single supplier position with them. He explains that he managed to save the customer for the company once. The company where he worked before changed the paper qualities from one day to the next without telling the customer. The customer used to have the best quality, and the supplier used their own material that had similar characteristics but was cheaper. Nils said that he took sides with the customer and tried to help as quickly as possible. He thinks that he has had quite a good relationship with him since then. After the visit this time in which Nils tried to convince his customer contact to return to him, which meant a change of supplier, Nils summarizes:

'I just feel that he would do it. He talks so much more, he did not just want to get rid of me and he talks a lot about different things. I don't think he would do that with everyone. Maybe it got that way because I always asked about everything.'

Nils thinks that a good salesperson is not someone who sells the product but someone who manages to reach a more social level with the customer:

'You have to give the customer the feeling that you are more than just a salesperson who wants to sell something, but rather a friend that the customer can talk to. (...) You always get somewhere on the emotional path. At first, you do not know each other but when the personal contact develops you get information...'

He continues:

'The company is often in the background for the customers. More important is that the one who comes to the customer is a good conversation partner and competent; that shows because you can keep customers even if you switched your company. But of course you need to be able to say with a good conscience that the delivery is timely and of good quality.'



# Chapter Six - Providing for What the Customer Wants

This is the first of four chapters exploring the activities in which the salesperson attempts to create value in sales interactions. It presents my interpretations of how the salesperson and customer work out their interactions in which the *customer expresses or indicates at the beginning or throughout the interaction what he or she wants to 'get out of' it*. The interactions discussed in this chapter suggest that the customers' goals in the sales interactions are quite specific. While they need the salesperson to get what they want, the customers seem informed about the own situation, and seem to influence and drive the interaction in the direction they prefer. They also appear to be the ones that establish the roles at the beginning of the encounter when they are expressing what they want from the salesperson. Hence, the customers' acts lead one to assume that they have expectations about what the salesperson should do in the interaction in order to accomplish their intended outcome.

The interactions in this chapter suggest that *salespeople act according to their interpretation* that doing what they think customers want them to do makes the interaction valuable for them. Or in other words, what seems to make the interactions valuable for customers is that they get what they asked the salesperson for. By pursuing the customer's goals in the interaction, the salesperson signals to the customers that they will achieve their goal or at least will do so in some future interaction. While this is similar throughout the various interactions, the empirical dimensions or examples of value for the customer are specific to the interaction as they relate to the customer's situation and what he or she aims to 'get out of' the interaction with the salesperson. However, the salesperson's attempt to create value for the customer is the same throughout this chapter and that is to *act so as to achieve his or her goal in the interaction*.

While these interactions seem to be driven by the customers trying to pursue their goals, the most apparent goal that the salesperson achieves by providing the customers with what they say they want, or doing what they say they want to be done is a tangible (future) outcome of a sold product or an order. Another interpretation is that *satisfying the customer* by doing what he or she wants, *might symbolize in itself a value for the salesperson*. The fact that a satisfied customer is one aspect that makes a customer interaction valuable for the salesperson, but not vice versa, goes back to the imbalanced salesperson-customer relationship. To put it in simple terms, the customer relationship is crucial for the salesperson to sustain their professional existence, and keeping the customer happy is one step towards maintaining the relationship. What seems to make it valuable for the salesperson to satisfy the customer is that it might create a feeling of obligation in the customer that the salesperson hopes to *encourage reciprocal acts* from the customer in the future.

## Assuring a Solution

While each of the individuals has an immediate goal with the interaction, many interactions are part of achieving a 'longer-term' or 'overarching' goal. In some interactions, salespeople are not able to immediately help the customer pursue the overall goal, for example, by providing a new design. They then try to instill trust in the customer that the new design will be presented at a subsequent meeting. In this interaction the customer is very specific in her expressions about what she wants the salesperson to do and how she wants him to do it. The salesperson is anxious to assure her that he is the right partner to provide her with what she is asking for and that she will get what she expects at the next meeting.

*David walks into the building with his access card and along the corridor at customer company N, greeting other people on the way, until he gets to the desk of Elisabeth, who works in the technical department. Before he takes a chair to sit next to her at the desk he gets himself and me a coffee from the kitchen. They start their conversation without any small talk or introduction, as if they had just had a coffee break and are now picking up the conversation from where they stopped before the break. After some discussion about former projects, Elisabeth says:*

‘And now we come to the displays. We need the second day because we need to know the status quo, where we are with our standard displays, how many products fit into one, we need to build up the displays and place the products. (She continues whispering) The problem is that we have lost so many sales all of a sudden. So far no one is saying anything but that will come. We will also have to work with the standard displays.’

David wonders: ‘Costs?’

E: ‘Yes, Dennis and I want to be proactive. One possibility to keep the display as it is...’

D: ‘...with the outer cover and the chutes.’

E: ‘Maybe no chutes. Then we have to see that they do not move around too much during transport. Dennis found something with which we could make our displays smaller. I thought it was not a bad idea, and we can work on it. Look here (shows him a picture of a display from the competition on the computer). They just included this wedge here, we really liked that, because then we have place for communication. And I said you could extend it here a little, you could fold it up, secure it with a little flap here, so that the products do not fall off on both sides. We could just turn this around and have it as a dispenser for our promotion card game or one could place a mini wobblers once the transport packaging is taken off.’

D: ‘OK, we can take two days, take the displays into a room in Fulda, shut ourselves in and let our creativity run wild. It would be interesting if we, say, we take only one basic foundation and only shelf units.’

E: ‘Yes, that would have been my next thought. So we need to do the following, we need to know the status quo, build up our existing displays and see what we could do here, and in the second round we look at our displays with shelf units. So that the assembly and packaging...’

D: ‘...is reduced.’

E: ‘And the next thought would have been a new basic foundation, we always get criticized for carrying around too much air with our basic foundation. Our aim is CCG1 [a survey on retail shopping experience].’ (She continues with more detailed technical descriptions of the display)

D: ‘Though, having this basic foundation was the advantage of the display. The initial thought was that we can have different tops and heights with the same basic foundation and still fulfill CCG1.’

E: ‘Yes, but there is just one big disadvantage, and that is Möller [supplier of the display basic foundation].’

D: ‘But that has nothing to do with it.’

E: 'No, but I want you guys to take this on, I will also fight this through in the purchasing department. I don't want to work with them anymore. I have enough work here. I haven't got the time to tell someone how to build up a basic foundation. And when there is anything about the print they tell me something about colors that they cannot print. I don't want to work with them anymore.'

*The conversation goes on for another twenty minutes about the technical details of the possible changes and about the preparation for the workshop. They talk about the materials David needs from Elisabeth for the workshop, for example how many product samples, and what David needs to prepare beforehand. Elisabeth continues juggling with some ideas. Finally, David says:*

'Let me and Jörg [designer] take care of this.'

E: 'We can't build displays that are secured from all four sides, we need to say goodbye to that. I want to reduce packaging and assembly cost, material cost, transport cost, the only thing might be that they end up laying me off as well.'  
(smiling)

D: 'No.'

E: 'I mean at the moment they are all ... ah well. Why are you so expensive?'  
(smiling)

D: 'We're not. It's the set-up cost.'

E: 'What are you saying to the lady in the bakery when she only buys three bread rolls? OK OK, only a joke but the bread rolls example makes sense.'

D: 'Yes I know. But we will start working on this now.'

E: 'The advantage is that if we cut the costs for these displays, then I have more over for other projects.'

(Both express some more thoughts on why and where they would save)

E: 'We see that the standard displays are sometimes too high and therefore not that popular with the supermarkets. But you make the best of it!'

D: 'Yes, I prepare everything.'

*They continue talking about her dog and the fact that David was planning a motorbike tour with one of her colleagues. David packs his stuff to go to the next meeting with other contacts in the same company.*

There are several indications in this extract suggesting this to be a rather *informal* meeting. The relaxed and casual manner with which, for example, David serves himself a coffee and pulls a chair up to Elisabeth's desk gives the

impression that he is not only very familiar with the setting but also that he has already developed certain routines in his interaction with Elisabeth. Another indication is that without any of the usual preliminaries, they immediately start discussing ongoing projects, with neither of them trying to reconstruct past events that would create some sort of frame for the interaction. Moreover, the entire course of the conversation appears informal since David interrupts Elisabeth twice to finish her sentence which she does not only accept but also seems to agree with what he says in completing her intended remarks. They have a brainstorming-like conversation where each of them takes up what seems to come to mind, without either of them holding longer monologues or listening periods. Finally, it is Elisabeth's ironic remarks, when she talks about losing her job and SCAP being too expensive with which she dramatizes her situation, but with her smile she also shows that she is not seriously upset.

Two situations during the conversation could be interpreted as Elisabeth's intention to show the *trust* that she has in David, first when she tells him about the bad situation the company is in and secondly when she asks him to take on extra work for the project because she does not want to work together with the other supplier anymore. These statements suggest that she not only provides David with important information that might put him into a better position against other suppliers, assuming that she does not share these insights with them as well, but she also gives David more responsibility and makes herself and the company structurally more dependent on him. These expressions signaling her trust and the generally informal atmosphere might be the reason why the conversation appears at first sight to be as if none of the individuals is in an obviously more powerful position than the other. Upon closer scrutiny, it looks as if Elisabeth *drives the direction of this interaction* where she portrays herself as the one who can ask David to do what she wants and she seems to be very clear about how she wants him to do it ('We need the second day because we need to know...', 'You make the best of it!').

What Elisabeth's acts convey to David is that she wants him to find ways in which they can reduce the cost of the displays. At the beginning of the interaction she whispers to David that her company has financial problems. One could interpret the reason why she whispers as a sign that this information is secret. At the same time, however, she is only placed together with her immediate colleagues whose projects are probably equally cost pressured internally as those of Elisabeth. Another interpretation could be that she wants



to alarm David with this information, that *she wants him to assign particular importance* to it. This interpretation would be consistent with the image that she uses later on in the conversation about her own potential lay-off. This not only symbolizes the dramatic situation of the company but also her insecure job situation as well as David's loss of a company contact.

In addition to the dramatic imagery of her lay-off she challenges David with a direct question '*Why are you so expensive?*'. No matter how serious this question and the bakery example are meant to be, by nagging about the costs she highlights the sense of urgency for reducing costs. *While the display designs with reduced packaging, assembly, material and transport cost appear to be her 'long-term' goal, in this interaction, she seems to aim at making sure that David understands the urgency of her request and that he has all the information from her to render a satisfactory outcome of the workshop.* Twice in the conversation Elisabeth uses the term 'we need to' thus telling David the exact procedure of how she wants David to structure the workshop. Additionally, she does not only make explicit the way in which she wants them to structure the workshop but she also already has some ideas on how the displays could be changed to be produced at less cost. Her acts and reactions lead to a suspicion that she is not particularly keen on discussing the different design options in this interaction, but rather gives David the information that he needs relying him to take on the job. One reason why she does not seem as keen on more information and background knowledge might be that she already seems to have some technical understanding of the topic. Another is that she seems rather stressed and overworked during the time when this interaction is taking place.

It is interesting that while she seems to be very intent on giving the direction for this interaction, she is not only the one who talks the most but she also keeps on presenting very concrete ideas that leave David more or less only with confirming and encouraging acts. Hence, she appears very eager and confident in her position as customer to push through her agenda. Nevertheless, *she also portrays herself as a victim and gives this issue a personal frame.* While she speaks of the company doing badly, she expresses her fears of losing her job. However, she also mentions that she will have more money for other projects when they manage to decrease the costs of this display line ('... if we cut the costs for these displays, then I have more over for other projects'). This proposes that it is not so much the general well-being of the company that she is concerned about at that moment but that she wants to move her projects away from potential

management scrutiny ('I want to be proactive'). With these acts she creates a platform for David to help her, a contact he has been working with for many years, personally in managing the situation. At the same time she gives David the proposition of new projects that promise to be more valuable for him in her view, as they might have a better margin ('more over').

David plays along in the interaction, he does not appear to be so concerned about what he gets out of it. Instead he shows her that he is listening actively, signaling that he understands by completing her sentences, contemplating her ideas and introducing some own reflections. Several times during the conversation he confirms that he will do what she asks him to do: *'OK we can do these two days'*, *'we will start working on this now'* and *'I prepare everything'*. It seems important for David to understand what Elisabeth wants and to assure her that he will take care of the workshop and that he will find solutions that help Elisabeth out of the internal cost pressure that she says to be facing. What he seems to try to achieve in the situation is to make Elisabeth put the workshop preparations in his hands and *signal her that he will take care of the workshop to her satisfaction and that she does not need to worry anymore* because he will prepare everything for the workshop so that it promises a successful outcome ('Let Jörg and me take care of this').

Based on this interpretation, I suggest that while the customer's overall goal seems to be to find cheaper design options, what seems to be her goal in this interaction is to convince David of the importance and urgency and to give him concrete requirements on the workshop and potential design solutions. The salesperson seems to have understood the urgency and intends to acknowledge his understanding back to her, e.g. *'OK, we take two days'* or *'We will start working on this now'*. I also want to interpret his acts as trying to make her confident that he understands what she is talking about by using the same technical terminology. This use of the terminology and suggesting some technical changes can mean that he is portraying his knowledge to symbolize his competence and credibility towards Elisabeth. David's acts could be interpreted as *attempting to relieve Elisabeth of the stress that she demonstrates in the interaction and give her the impression that she has achieved with the interaction what she wanted*. Elisabeth's reaction that she changes the topic and talks about her dog could be one indication that she has accomplished in the interaction what she wanted.

## Guaranteeing Delivery

The following interaction I also want to interpret as a salesperson's attempt to create value by assuring the customer they will get what they ask for and that he is the right partner for the job. The salesperson's acts suggest that he is interpreting the customer's relaxed attitude and is assured that he, the salesperson, in taking care of the assignment is valuable for the customer.

*Philip picks up Oscar at the reception where he had previously registered. Philip leads him into his office and offers him a coffee. Philip shows Oscar proudly the new Nespresso machine and explains to him that he has been promoted to purchasing manager, hence his own office with a coffee machine. After a short conversation about the new position and different coffee machines, Oscar asks about a supermarket tray that SCAP had delivered several years ago; he would like to use this for deliveries to a new supermarket chain.*

Philip: 'I even have the printing template here. It is a glossy in four colors, could that be right?'

Oscar: 'Hmm yes.' (looking at the printing pattern)

P: 'It should be printed on the outside and the inside should be kept white.'

O: 'Four colors in glossy, gold is not possible in flexo print, then we would need to use a special yellow, but different from this orange-yellow here. OK, I need to check this, because we [Nurnberg plant] only have four colors, there is always the possibility to mix the gloss into the colors.'

P: 'This print must be possible somewhere within the entire SCAP?'

O: 'Yes, in the worst case we have to do it at another plant, but should it be flexo print?'

P: 'Flexo was more expensive but cheaper with a greater volume?'

O: 'Yes, the printing plate is more expensive but the unit costs are lower.'

P: 'In one year from now everything can change again, what do you think makes sense?'

O: 'I will calculate the amount and check the offset price.'

*They agree that Oscar will get back to him within the same week. They end up talking a little longer about the customer's business while they finish their coffee. Back in the car Oscar explains that he has worked with Philip for a long time already:*

'When he [Philip] started as an apprentice, the purchasing manager was very tough towards him. He has always been with his apprentice at meetings and has always pushed him in a very authoritarian way. (...) It was embarrassing, also for me, how should you behave in these situations? It was obvious that the apprentice will be his successor one day. So I always try to keep somewhat neutral.'

Even though Oscar says that he and Philip have known each other for a long time, this interaction has a frame creating the impression of a rather *formal* meeting. The registration at the reception and the obligatory coffee offered by the customer are typical signifiers for establishing and recreating the roles and the dependencies in the salesperson and customer relationship. I want to interpret this interaction as a rather typical sales interaction where the individuals play the roles that one assumes them to play: The customer tells the salesperson what he or she wants and the salesperson tries to match the company's resources, such as the production possibilities, with the customer's requirements. The salesperson's goals in this interaction are not obvious to the observer, since Oscar seems to match the customer's requests with the resources of the plant with which he works the most and that is geographically closest ('gold is not possible in flexo print...'). Whether he considers it better for himself personally to produce at that plant or whether he considers it better for the customer remains somewhat unclear.

Intriguingly, instead of going back with the information about what Philip wants and following it up, Oscar shares his concerns and thoughts with him. One interpretation here could be that the salesperson wants to make things look less easy by using expressions such as '*is not possible*' and '*I need to check*'. If that is Oscar's intention it seems to be the opposite of what one assumes salespeople to say. The behavior that I would have expected is to treat the customer as king, making everything possible and not bothering the customer with any complications that the salesperson might face when fulfilling the customer's requirements. One way of interpreting this behavior is to say that Oscar is seeking more appreciation for his work and his role in the interaction. *That he is*

*needed beyond access to the resources as someone who has to advise the customer or solve their problems* ('use a special yellow', 'mix the gloss into the colors').

Another interpretation could also be that Oscar wants to convince Philip that he is able and willing to satisfy his requirements. The use of technical terminology could imply that he wants to *portray his competence in the field* and his understanding of the customer's request. As a consequence, he might consider the problems aloud because he wants to *signal to Philip that he takes his request seriously*, even though it might be just a simple tray. This interpretation could be supported by the clarifying question, *'should it be flexo?'*, which suggests that Oscar wants to make sure that he knows what the customer requires and that he needs to find the best option that will satisfy him. This question triggers a few more questions from Philip with which he tries to better understand what the options are. Philip is specific about the final appearance of the packaging design, showing Oscar the print layout, but he appears less determined about how the packaging should be produced.

The interpretations suggest that while Philip's overall goal is to get the tray, he wants to use this interaction to provide Oscar with the necessary information so that he won't have to bother about anything anymore. Not only does Oscar listen to the information and leave, but he seems to convince Philip that he is taking his request seriously by asking further questions. It appears that Oscar intends to portray his role as expert or advisor rather than just a delivery service. I feel that Oscar's acts can be interpreted as attempts to assure Philip that he will find the best option for Philip since he is portraying his ability and willingness ('I will calculate the amount and check the offset price'). The interaction suggests that Oscar judges that doing what the customer requires as expressed during the interaction, that is finding the best option for the production, *is the way to make the customer happy; he has achieved what he wanted and does not have to bother about it anymore*. One could consider the act of Philip changing the topic to general anecdotes about his work as an indication that he has achieved in the interaction what he set out to do, or at least that he has gotten closer to his goal for the interaction. Hence, in this interaction just as in the former one, *the value for the customer seems to lie in the assurance that the salesperson is willing and able to provide them with what they are asking for*.

## Sharing Expert Insights

It is not always an explicit request expressed at the beginning or during the interaction that the salesperson interprets as the customer's aim with the meeting, it could also be more indirect questions, or other acts and reactions that seem to signal what the customer wants.

*After Adam has completed his usual visit to the purchasing department at customer Ge in order to discuss some issues with one of the purchasing managers, the latter asks him about his plans for the rest of the day. Adam answers that Peter, one of the marketing staff, wanted to talk about a display idea. The purchasing manager remarks with a slightly amused gesture that Peter probably has another grand idea for a product design. Back in the big entrance hall, Adam and I sit down at one of the round tables and wait. After a short while Peter comes down with a writing block and a small paper construction he has made in the shape of a round staircase. The two start talking about the display right away:*

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

Adam: (shakes his head without saying anything)

P: 'No really not?'

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

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

A: 'The former display had this figure as a support in the back so that it is stable, if you want to have it next to it, then the display would bend, I think that's tricky.'

P: 'Yes I know we had it once as a support in the back. Hmm, but I know we also had this round staircase once before, but then we had a base that stretched it and kept it in the round form. It had the nice round shape on the base...'

A: '...but was losing shape towards the top of the display.'

P: 'Indeed. And then we didn't have the desired effect anymore either.'

...

*The discussion continues for about another twenty minutes. Throughout the following conversation Adam comes up with three more options for constructing the design idea that are all slightly different from the initial one. With every proposal he mentions the different disadvantages and challenges with the constructions. Peter asks clarifying questions about materials throughout the conversation and asks Adam several times to repeat an idea or elaborate it further. At one point in the conversation Peter notes that this new display should not be too much work since it is not for a new product line. Later he mentions that he would like to see the idea in a full-size sample construction but that he still needs to present it internally. But before he presents it, he needs to know if the idea is at all feasible. At some point they agree that one of the options is more workable than the other. The discussion continues:*

P: 'And how would it look with the support in the back, if we need it for the round shape? It doesn't matter how the display looks from behind.'

A: 'OK, so if we say we do the boxes in this format, then we have to see how round we can make this part technically, here we cover up 2/3 of the supporting back, so we could make a little attachment and only build this part with a support in the back, then we could also use an E-wave [thin type of corrugated material].'

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

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

P: 'OK, so it is possible either way. OK, then we don't do anything for the moment since I still need to present the idea internally. It is always bad if you present it before you know whether the construction is possible because afterwards the idea is signed off even if it's not feasible and then you can't build the display.'

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

P: 'OK. Very good. Is there anything you need now or do we only proceed once I get back to you?'

A: 'I would say that once you say, 'OK this is the way', we continue. Otherwise we end up creating something that your colleagues don't like.'

P: 'Yes alright.'

A: 'Surely we will meet at the Fachpack [major packaging fair in Germany]?'

P: 'When is it?'

...

*Adam gives Peter two tickets to the packaging fair and they agree that Peter calls him once he has presented the idea internally and knows how the idea is perceived. On the way out, after meetings with other contact people in the company, we walk past Peter who sits together with a salesperson from the competition, giving him the same briefing. To my question if this was OK, Adam explains that this is only normal since they always want two opinions, so they do not have to rely on one supplier telling them whether something is possible or not. Later in the car Adam mentions that these projects take time. Once Peter gets back to him he will have to sit together with the designers and they have to make a sample. He assumes that the sample will have to be redone at least once in accordance with changes made by the customer, and only then he might get the order. At a later stage when we talk about technical knowledge, Adam seems to refer back to this meeting:*

‘There are questions: “How can we do a round display, what sheet can we use and how can we use the sheet?”. Sure, you could say we can manage all that but then we have the problem afterwards. A certain amount of technical knowledge is necessary here. Of course we can’t all be designers but you need to identify with it. So it is important to be honest and competent.’

If I did not know the context of the meeting and the professions of the two individuals, the meeting could have also been a brainstorming session between two colleagues, especially because Peter, even though he is the one who opens the conversation, does not frame his question in a way that indicates that he wants help. The first question allows Adam only to express confirmation (‘right?’) and is followed directly by another one that only allows a yes or no answer (‘But if you change this part would it be easier?’). Hence, while I assume from Adam’s statement previous to this interaction that he knows Peter wants his insights on one of his display ideas, the roles of the one expressing wants and the other satisfying them are not obvious from the beginning of the interaction. *There does not seem to be the need of either Peter or Adam to establish their roles or the context* from the beginning, since they neither make small talk nor discuss things from earlier meetings that would have framed this meeting in a sales context.

Throughout the conversation, however, the roles become more evident since Peter is the one who phrases the technical suggestions in questions, waiting for a reaction from Adam. He also tends to repeat Adam’s answers in his own words, which seems to be a gesture of double-checking whether he understood Adam right. This way of asking and proposing ideas makes the meeting appear not



only very spontaneous and improvised but also somewhat *informal*. It is not informal in the way that they talk about private issues outside work, but in the sense that they do not seem to follow any behavioral patterns or manners that they feel are expected from the other or those that one might expect from more stereotypical sales meetings. For example, they do not seem to try to be cautious in not interrupting the other and neither of them uses the gestures of offering a seat or coffee. Nevertheless, the interaction does not portray any obvious dependencies in the relationship. *None of them uses knowledge asymmetry to their advantage*, in the sense that the salesperson does not share his ideas about production possibilities or that the customer keeps to himself information about the use or the plans for the display. Peter seems very keen to understand whether the display can potentially be constructed and how, but he also seems want to know the reasons behind it, for example by repeating what Adam framed as problem: *'Hmm, OK, the material needs to be thinner to bend the stairs but then everything becomes unstable'*, which encouraged Adam to clarify this reason further.

One gets the impression that Adam is comfortable in his position in this interaction, he does not appear stressed about all the questions since he takes his time to reflect and think about the possibilities. He seems so confident that he sometimes, whether on purpose or not, drifts off into such technical issues that Peter has to stop him because he cannot follow: *'Was a bit too fast, but whatever (smiling)'*. The *technical conversation seems to give him confidence, as it seems to be his playground where he has the upper hand over the customer and can play the expert*. At the same time he describes the customer's idea as problem and tricky. He suggests the complexity and problematic issues of the display idea, for example, by shaking his head at a question to which Peter seemingly hopes to get a positive confirmation from Adam.

Hence, Adam does not seem to make any effort to let the construction of the display idea that the customer wants to do sound easy. At the beginning of the interaction one could almost get the impression that Adam is not very interested in the project but another interpretation would be that he wants to set Peter's expectations right by demonstrating the complexity of the display design. A third reason that Adam might have for using his skeptical comments is to show the thoroughness with which he approaches Philips questions. Adam assumes that Peter asks him for his input on the display idea because he knows that Adam is knowledgeable and hence well suited for it. The way Adam mentions

advantages and disadvantages for every idea, explains the problems to Philip and uses technical and rather neutral terms (no good or bad), suggests that Adam wants *his input to come across as rather objective and thorough, almost scientific*.

A different interpretation of Adam's scientific approach to Peter's question could be that Adam wants to let the project appear more complicated in order to *increase Peter's uncertainty and his appreciation for Adam's work*. However, since Adam knows that Peter would ask for a second opinion he would have maneuvered himself into a weaker position compared to his competition if he made things sound purposefully tougher than they are. Moreover, towards the end of the interaction Adam makes sure that he expresses his confidence in this display ('I could imagine this', 'I think this is possible'). Adam seems to intend to show that he takes his ideas and questions serious, and he keeps up his image of an expert who gets asked for input with his confidence and scientific approach. But he also wants to show his interest and confidence in the feasibility of the construction that he proposed: *'Once you are ready we can start with the design'*.

Adam's interpretation of Peter's goal in this interaction is not the readily constructed display design, even though that seems to be his long-term goal. This interaction suggests that *Peter wants to understand if his design is doable and how it can be done, as well as getting an opinion of someone he seems to trust: 'It is always bad if you present it before you know whether the construction is possible because afterwards the idea is signed off but you can not make the display.'* Adam is not under pressure to get any kind of commitment from Peter about this project and he lets Peter set the pace and make the decision by saying that Peter should get back to him when he has cleared the way for the project internally. These acts indicate that Adam gives Peter his opinion and makes sure that he substantiates the role that the customer assigned to him as expert. My interpretation is that *Adam attempts to create value by giving Peter what he wants from the interaction in the form of his opinion ('I think it is possible') and ideas on how it is possible ('OK, so if we say we do the boxes in this format, ... then we could also use an E-wave.'*) But he also wants to assure Peter in his role perception of him as expert and hence encourages Peter to contact him again when he has got internal acceptance of the project.

It is intriguing to consider the *risk* that Adam takes in the interaction. He shares his ideas with Peter, explaining them in great detail. Peter, however, could turn to the other salesperson he meets afterwards and ask him to do the display design or he could drop the project entirely. Whatever the case, Peter got an unpaid expert opinion leading to his doing a better job on the design and could convince his colleagues and managers of his ideas and competence. There are two potential reasons behind Adam's behavior, the first being that he is confident that he has convinced Peter with his idea and trusts that Peter would not just hand the idea over to a competitor for production. Another interpretation could be that he feels that *the value he created for Peter lies in sharing his expert opinion*. The customer seems to have gotten from the interaction what he wanted, that is an idea of how to construct his display. Additionally, Peter's reactions in the form of 'very good', 'that sounds good' and 'I'm beginning to like the idea' suggests that Peter seems feeling good about the interaction.

As a side-note on the idiosyncrasy of value it can be remarked that in this interaction the customer seems keen to learn from Adam, to understand what is behind different display construction possibilities. Looking back at the interaction between David and Elisabeth, one could say that she was not particularly interested in discussing different design options but instead she was concerned with giving David the information that, according to her, he needed to make sure that he finds a good solution. Evidently, not every customer seems to consider the learning experience valuable, especially since paper packaging is often only a small part of the customer's product. As in Elisabeth's situation she seems to appreciate that she can rely on David's competence and thereby does not need to explain how things work. Hence, in this interaction I consider *expert opinion and insights* as value dimensions for the customer but only because that is what the customer in this interaction asked for and seems to appreciate judging from the reactions.

## Offering a Friendly Deal

*Edward and Kai, the contact at customer Tu, discuss several new packaging projects. At one point Kai seems to feel that he is in a dilemma because he does not know how to progress with the new optimized packaging.*

Kai: 'My problem is that I do not have the machine in real life yet. It could be that if the machine works well, everyone says that we should have the packaging 2 mm smaller. Now I do not know what to do, should I rather take a bit more paper and have a bit more air? I mean the lid carries the weight anyway. I can't do a real life test with the packaging right now. That's too expensive.'

Edward: 'The same for us, the samples that we always do for free.' (*smiling*)

K: 'Hmm, theoretically it is only one tool<sup>4</sup>.'

E: 'Bottom and lid, two tools.'

K: 'How much is one?'

E: 'Between 1200 and 900 Euro.'

K: 'Hmm, what should I do now? Tell me! Should we advance and improve or take the safe way?'

E: 'I would leave the packaging as it is [optimized/improved packaging].'

K: 'And if it doesn't fit with the machine, what are we doing with the tool?'

E: 'Then it's your fault?' (*smiling*)

K: 'Hmm, so if I need new tools anyway, then I can also ask another supplier again...' (*smiling*)

E: 'I can build some risk into the price of the first tool. So you pay 1500 for one tool and if it is wrong and you need a new one you do not pay anything.'

K: 'OK, let's do that.'

*Kai refills the coffee cups and starts talking about his new company car and Edward joins the conversation about cars, talking about the company cars that they can choose from at SCAP.*

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<sup>4</sup> The tool is used to punch out the packaging format from the paper rolls and is usually unique for each packaging.

Having been present at the interaction, it is important to note that the sarcastic statements accompanied by smiles happened in an informal and friendly context free from signs of tension or malicious joy. This might not be evident when reading the interaction because of the missing contextual knowledge. However, Kai and Edward have already been working with each other for quite some time. After Edward moved to another company within the same industry, Kai asked him to continue working with him since he was not satisfied with Edward's successor at the previous company.

Just as in the previously discussed interactions, it appears that it is the customer that sets the roles and the direction of the interaction in the opening sentences. Kai uses the terms '*my problem*' and '*I do not know what to do*', and speaks first about his bothersome situation and then expresses his uncertainty about how he is going to deal with it. A few sentences later in the interaction Kai asks Edward directly for his opinion on what he should do. The terminology and the framing as a question used by the customer create a *role division of expert and layman or teacher and student or helper and helped*. The first impression is that Edward does not intend to take on the role of the expert giving Kai advice, as in his reaction he neither shows particular seriousness nor concern regarding Kai's problem (e.g. 'The same for us, the samples that we always do for free.').

One interpretation could be that Edward wants to play down Kai's problem because he doesn't want Kai to be stressed about it, it could be Edward's way of *comforting Kai in his stressful situation* of having to make a decision. Another interpretation is that Edward is playing with the situation in which he has the upper hand, so by not showing concern and even joking about the fact that it will be Kai's fault in front of the colleagues he might also somewhat dramatize the situation for Kai thus *highlighting his need for help*. An indication that might substantiate the latter interpretation is that Edward refers to an imbalance that he perceives in the relationship where he and his company have to work, i.e. create samples, without getting paid. This comment could be read as underscoring Kai's dependency situation of not knowing what to do by comparing it to his similar situation that he usually experiences as a salesperson in that industry. At the same time, however, Edward recreates the perceived notion of salesperson's customer dependency with this statement and Kai uses it later on in his comment, '*then I can also ask another supplier again*'.

Interpreting Kai's question considering that Kai changed suppliers only to work with Edward, I propose that Kai asks Edward because of his experience in the packaging field, he asks him because he can trust Edward's answer as advice from an expert. The way in which Edward frames the answer, however, appears rather to be as *advice from a friend*, 'I would leave the packaging as it is'. Since he has no further explanation and uses no technical terminology, he appears not to care about justifying his opinion, making it sound objective or appear scientific which would signal an expert role towards Kai. It could be that Edward does not feel the need to substantiate his competence and credibility because he thinks that Kai would not ask for his advice if he did not consider it to be trustworthy.

At this point, I would interpret the customer's goal is to get the salesperson's advice, and with that the salesperson's attempt to create value in giving him this advice. However, in the continuation of the conversation one gets the impression that the advice on what Edward would do in Kai's situation is not what Kai wants to 'get out of' the interaction or at least not anymore. What Kai seems to seek is a way to reduce the negative consequences, or make sure that there are no negative consequences when he reaches the decision that Edward advises him to do ('And if it doesn't fit with the machine?'). After Edward does not react to Kai's question of what would happen if the decision was wrong, in a way that Kai wanted him to react he indicates his option to choose the supplier and thus points at the power relations between customer and salesperson, falling into the joking mood that Edward has exhibited before.

One interpretation of the outcome of this interaction is that *Kai managed to influence Edward in that he proposes him a deal that does not involve any bigger risk for him* ('I can build some risk into the price'). With this deal a negative consequence of Kai's decision would not create any extra cost and thus no problems internally for him. The initial higher tool costs would most likely not be noticed by any of Kai's colleagues and therefore would not mean trouble for Kai. Kai seems rather determined to get Edward to offer him help, whether it was exactly that option or another one. He keeps on asking and using provoking statements until Edward offers a deal with which he seems to be content (OK, let's do that). He seems confident in his appeals to Edward's conscience and possibility to give him a special deal that reduces his risk and making his decision easy since it holds no negative consequences. The trust that Kai seems to have in Edward symbolized by the question and the encouragement of telling him what he should do, could be seen as an important condition for Kai's

confidence that Edward would play along with his questions and jokes and actually make him such an offer. The offer that decreases the risk for Kai actually puts Edward in a position where he might have to take the responsibility in front of his internal colleagues and manager for producing a tool that is not paid for by the customer.

Edward finds himself in a position *where the only way to get the customer what he wants is to take a risk of his own*. Either he is confident that the decision is right and he will not have to let a new tool be produced, or he considers helping Kai in this situation as outweighing the trouble that he might face internally when having to justify the production of a tool without payment. These interpretations suggest that Edward attempts to make the interaction valuable for the customer by giving Kai what he wants, that is not only the advice from friend to friend but the deal that decreases Kai's risk. In this interaction I propose that they are valuable for the customer because that is what Kai seems to aim to 'get out of' the interaction. Moreover, he appears content with the outcome of the interaction ('OK, let's do that').

## Satisfying the Customer

The main focus of the interactions above has been on the salesperson's attempt to create customer value. Common to all these interactions is that the salesperson helps the customer to achieve the goals they have with the interaction or, in other words, they do what they think that the customer wants or would appreciate that they do. These interactions appear to deal mainly with an attempt to create customer value. I have argued that the reason why the salesperson sets out to create value for the customer lies in the imbalanced nature of the salesperson-customer relationship, with the salesperson usually being more dependent on the customer than vice versa. The reasons are most likely the related income and the job position itself (no sales without a customer) but could also be, for example, internal prestige. All the above interactions could be interpreted in terms of salesperson dependency, since in all the interactions apart from the main goal of the salesperson, seem to be to help the customer pursue his or her goal by getting them what they want or doing what they want.

'If he needs containers, or tape or anything, I need to get it. For example now there are bigger formats that we do not have in the plant here, we order them from Nördlingen, which is terrible for us because it is 500 km away and might not pay off.' (Marcus)

What is it, however, that the salesperson apparently gains from providing the customer with what he or she wants? Based on the interactions above, I would propose that it is a satisfied customer. The salespeople seem to bring the interaction to a close when they think that the customer has achieved their goal. The interaction between Adam and Peter, where Adam did not seem to have any problem in ending the interaction after over an hour of advising without that getting any sign of commitment from Peter, suggests that helping the customer achieve their goal of the interaction is a salesperson's goal as such. Hence, from the impression that the customer has achieved his or her goal and is satisfied with it, the salesperson gets the feeling of having achieved the own goal in the interaction. With the following examples I present a suggestion why a satisfied customer could symbolize value for the salesperson.

#### *Interaction one*

*On another occasion between David and Elisabeth, her boss calls him and asks whether he could organize a machine for the assembly of trays. David tells Elisabeth about the phone call afterwards:*

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

Elisabeth: 'Oh no.'

D: 'There are very simple machines that are around 50000 Euro. That's easy.'

E: 'Do you know how many trays you can assemble with cheap labor? A person could manage the same amount per minute.'

D: 'I know but he thinks that with a machine tray he will save material, so that the prices come down to the old ones again. Just send me the article numbers and I can do the calculation, old costs, costs automatic, costs manual.'

*David calls a SCAP internal contact, a machine expert, and checks if he could get such a machine. By chance he has a second-hand machine on site that fits the description. David calls Elisabeth's boss again, tells him about it and offers to let him have a look at it. After the boss tells David when he is available, David tries several*



*times to get back to his internal contact to warn him that he needs to prepare the machine in time. After he finally gets through, David is very happy about the arrangement. He seems a bit sour about the fact that salespeople do not benefit from machine sales because SCAP does not sell machines, however, he seems to console himself:*

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

In this interaction the salesperson gets the customer what he asks for, but it also appears that it is not a usual sales interaction because SCAP, as a rule, does not sell packaging machines. In this case, however, the customer contact seems to know that David has the contacts and network to get him what he needs. What is intriguing in this interaction is, however, that it shows that the salesperson provides for the customer's wants even though they are not related to a sale that is relevant for him. David already sells these trays to the customer but they are now to be changed from being manually assembled to an automatic process. This interaction does not make sense for David with regard to what he considers the typical sales goals ("So you could say, "whatever, I only make sales of 30 000 Euro with these trays".'). The reason why he is doing this contact a favor is because he is valuable to David, as he seems to be responsible for important production plants.

One interpretation would be that this contact is valuable to David because satisfying this influential customer contact might be useful for the future should he have problems somewhere within the customer company. Underlying David's act, however, seems to be his assumption that by doing a favor for this contact, organizing him a machine, which is usually not David's business, this contact will most likely return a favor some time in future when David needs one. Hence, what David attempts to *'get out of this interaction is a feeling of obligation from the customer encouraging a reciprocal act from the customer, which could be valuable in the future for him, the salesperson.*

### *Interaction two*

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

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

*Marcus brought along a written presentation and a box with different corrugated materials. He started off with a short presentation of SCAP and simple facts about corrugated materials. After that he goes through the different materials and explains the different paper qualities and corrugated wave types. The customer is very keen to understand the specifications so that that he can order them and the supplier will understand what he is asking for. In the end, the customer asks: ‘So, what would the procedure be when I need a new packaging?’ Marcus answers that they would need to meet, since the material choice depends on its use and the customer’s processes. Afterwards in the car Marcus says: ‘The customer was maybe hoping that he could do it all by himself, that everything makes sense, but it is not that easy and logical, so for a new packaging you have to get together anyway.’ He continues saying that in his experience these things always ‘generate a return’ because next time when this contact has a new project he will remember Marcus who explained everything to him.*

The salesperson’s intention to make the interaction valuable by doing what he thinks the customer asks for seems the same here as in the interactions above. However, Marcus also talks about ‘*creating a good atmosphere*’ and that the effort he is making by driving there and educating the customer contact will ‘generate returns’. One suggestion is that Marcus wants to establish a personal contact with the new person in this position and make a good impression with him. The good impression could be that Marcus shows a genuine interest in the customer by making the effort to visit the person without getting anything ‘obvious’ out of it, e.g. a product sale. Hence, he is showing his willingness to work with the customer and help but he might also intend to show his capabilities by nurturing the teacher-student role division in which he portrays himself as expert by using different tools at hand and explaining technical terms to the new contact. In this way he might not only build credibility with the new contact but also gratitude to Marcus who is explaining everything that he asked for.

Hence, he does him this favor without the customer reciprocating in the interaction. This circumstance however seems to make Marcus confident in that it will 'generate returns' some day.

Based on the interpretation of this interaction I also want to suggest that it seems valuable for the salesperson *to create a feeling of obligation or gratitude with the customer because it might lead to 'a reciprocal act'* from the customer that could be valuable for the salesperson. This reciprocal act, the call, could symbolize the beginning of a new customer relationship or another project.

Another interpretation, although perhaps not relevant in this context but that I do not want to ignore here is that Marcus talks about educating the developer because then they *'speak the same language'*. Hence, another goal or interest that I could interpret from this comment is that Marcus intends to decrease the risk of misunderstanding or increase the possibility of interesting more advanced packaging projects ('it is easier for us to communicate'). Two interpretations of what a knowledgeable customer could symbolize for Marcus is firstly trouble free interactions with the customer and hence an easier job, and potentially more fun to work with.

# Chapter Seven - Improving Customer Situations

In the former chapter I suggest that it is the customer who is driving the direction and strongly influencing the outcome by expressing a clear goal that they expect to achieve from the interaction. The interactions discussed in this chapter have a different dynamic. The customers also seem to express a goal that they want to achieve with the interaction but they seem unsure about its specific outcome and course. Characteristic of these interactions is that the customers face a situation of distress, ambiguity or uncertainty. This situation does not allow them to specify further what they want from the salesperson other than *help to improve the own situation*.

Common to all interactions is that the customer proactively asks the salesperson for help to get out of a troublesome situation as a consequence of the feeling of not being able to manage it alone. Thus, the customer frames these interactions to be about problem solving or helping, and creates a helper-helped role context in which the interaction evolves. By asking the salesperson to come by to help as part of an interaction between customer and salesperson preceding the face-to-face interactions, the customer establishes a dependency relationship somewhat inverse to the one discussed in the previous chapter. The level of urgency for help varies in the interactions. Sometimes the meeting has been set up by a call from the customer asking the salesperson to come by but without any particular urgency. Other times the interaction evolves from a planned meeting that has been set up as a continuation of a previous one, or the interaction occurs because the salesperson by chance happens to be in the right place at the right time. Finally, in some interactions the salesperson gets a message on the same day or the one before and needs to cancel and change all the planned meetings to meet with the customer.

In the following interactions, the *salespeople seem to act according to the interpretation that their acts in improving the customer's situation* is what appears to make it valuable for them. Or in other words, what seems to make the interactions valuable for the customer based on his or her reactions is a better or improved situation after the interaction than before. Salespeople attempt to improve the customer's situation either by trying to find the reasons for the customer's trouble, by advising him or her on how to deal with the situation, by providing the customer with what is needed to solve the situation and prevent worse things happening, or by meeting him or her to give assurance that they will improve the situation. The different ways in which the salesperson tries to improve the customer situation evolve from different types of uncertainties the customer is facing. In some situations, the customer simply does not understand why he or she is encountering trouble. In other situations, the customer just does not know how to deal with the problem in hand, cannot change things to the better, and is simply unable to resolve the situation alone, for reasons of time pressure and lack of resources.

While helping the customer, the salesperson also attempts to create value for him- or herself. It is the customer's feeling of uncertainty, ambiguity and distress that enables the salespeople to play the role of helper, thus giving them the possibility to create value for the customer. In some interactions the salesperson seems to influence the interactions so as to create the need for a helper by *defining and communicating problems* to the customer together with explaining a way of solving it. In others, the salespeople try to nurture and maintain this *helper image* through their behavior when interacting with the customer. It appears that the salesperson attempts to maintain or increase the *customer's dependence*.

## Explaining Problems

There are many situations in the day-to-day work of the salesperson where he or she gets asked by the customer to come by because of difficulties with dealing with a situation that has emerged. Typical examples are when the customer has trouble in the production of the packaging and therefore asks the salesperson to have a look and find the underlying reasons. *In one situation, for example, Hans gets a call and one of his major, long-term customers mentions that he has a problem*

*with the packaging in his assembly line and wonders if Hans could come by. At the customer, Hans goes into the production and looks at how the assembly personnel work with the packaging, how they fold it, assemble it and strip it while he is talking to his contact. Hans seems to find what is in his view the reason for the problem and tells his contact that they put the packaging the wrong way into the stripping machine which squeezes the packaging unnecessarily. Together they try it the other way around and both of them agree that it works much better and avoids damage to the packaging. The customer contact talks to the personnel and Hans and his contact leave the production to talk about other projects.*

As in all interactions in this chapter salespeople seem to act according to the interpretation that their help in improving the customer's situation is what seems to make it valuable for them. In the above and the following interaction the customers ask the salesperson for help as it seems that they are uncertain about the problem they are facing, either because they cannot take the time to investigate the problem or because they do not know how to go about it. Based on the interpretation of the customer's acts and reactions the salesperson assumes the role of expert explaining the customer the reason for the problem.

*In the car before the meeting Marcus tells me that his contact, Matthew at customer Hy, has called and asked him to come to the plant to help because their customer threatened to not place any more orders if the products arrive the same way as they did the last time. He said that the customer seemed rather stressed because he demanded that this should not happen a second time.*

*When we get to the office, Matthew leads Marcus first into a small meeting room where a packaging box is sitting on a table packed with the customer's products, paper serviettes. Matthew explains that the lower boxes on pallets that they deliver to their customer split and are demolished when they get to the customer. They first have a look at the box to see if there is any obvious problem with the construction. Marcus measures the box and the free space on top and makes notes. The only thing that Marcus can see is that the box is not filled right up and has five centimeters of air at the top, but he also says that that should not be the cause of any serious deformation. Marcus asks what exactly the claim from the customer is and Matthew leads him to his computer in the office where he shows him the pictures of the claimed packaging that the customer sent him via email. These show that the corrugated boxes on the bottom of the pallet are deformed and split. Marcus said that the pictures are quite strange and that he cannot imagine how this could happen since the material of the*

*box construction should be strong enough to hold the boxes above on the pallet. He points at one of the pictures and says that the stretching foil is not wrapped round the whole load on the pallet, as it should be, but only half way up. Matthew agrees and says that it is strange since it is not how the pallets leave the production halls. Marcus has a hard time to find the cause for the damage to the boxes according to the pictures, so they move into the production hall to take a look at some pallets that are there waiting to be sent to this customer. After talking and inspecting the pallet and the boxes from different angles, they agree that there does not seem to be anything wrong with the way they are packed and stretched when they leave the hall.*

*Back in the office, Marcus considers the box again and how it is packed with the content. In the following conversation Marcus tries to find out if anything has changed from before since he knows that customer Hy has been supplying to the customer for a while already. All that Matthew knows is that they fill the boxes with a little more goods than before. This is in Marcus' view not likely to be the problem, so he asks whether anything has changed regarding the transport of these boxes. Matthew does not know but makes an internal phone call. They find that because of fewer order numbers, the pallets are now transported by rail and then repacked. For Marcus, this is the most likely reason why the boxes are now getting damaged. Marcus said that he would like to forward the claim information and the pictures from the customer's customer to the SCAP internal quality control even though he feels that the pictures are very hard to reconstruct. He says that the first step for him is to find out if the right material has been used for the box construction, and how much weight the material should be able to carry, considering that customer Hy fills the boxes with more weight than initially. The next step would be to propose the shortening of the box design.*

*... (continues in next subchapter)*

The first acts of Marcus and Matthew here that start the interaction already establish the *roles of the helper and helped*, which both of them continuously substantiate throughout the interaction. Matthew does not only call Marcus to ask if he can come by to help him, he also explains that he has got a claim from his customer but does not know why and what the problem is. By driving to Matthew the next day Marcus signals that he is willing to try to help. With these first actions in the interaction, they establish their roles of the helped, the one who neither understands the problem, nor how to solve it, and the helper who comes by to find the reasons for the problem and help the customer out of the

problematic situation. Matthew highlights the sincerity of his situation by telling Marcus that he is on the verge of losing a customer. What exactly the customer seems to perceive as an improved situation and hence what the role of the helper entails for Marcus is not clear from this excerpt of the interaction and it also seems to change throughout the interaction. In the first part of the interaction the salesperson appears to interpret the improved situation for the customer as understanding the reason for the problem.

When Marcus gets to the customer, the latter leads him to the problematic box right away. It is the packaging that Matthew's customer has complained about. Matthew can only tell Marcus that the packaging is damaged when it gets to the customer but he does not give him any indication as to what he thinks the problem might be. Instead of telling Marcus more explicitly about the claim from the customer Matthew seems to want Marcus to find out if there is anything wrong with the packaging by leading him to the physical product. This suggests that Matthew wants Marcus to take the lead in the interaction. In response to Marcus' questions, however, he seems eager to provide Marcus with access to all the various sources of information that he has: the packaging, the pictures and the palletizing of the packaging, to give him the chance to find a reason for the problem.

Marcus' acts suggest that he takes on the role of problem investigator in the interaction. Marcus uses measuring tools to investigate the box, he picks it up, turns it round and asks very specific and detailed questions about the loading of the box. He writes down the measurements he has made, he asks more detailed questions about the exact claim from the customer. Throughout the entire interaction, Marcus has used tools that suggested a technical and thorough approach to the problem search. He has been very detailed in his questions and thus initiated to see different sources of information. He has asked specific questions about all of these, sharing the observations about the shortcomings that he sees. Altogether, with the step-by-step procedure, the usage of the tools and handling of the boxes Marcus creates a very thorough, professional impression, symbolizing a *scientific approach substantiating his role as problem investigator*.

One reason for why Marcus might try to substantiate his role as helper or problem investigator is that he might want to establish his credibility. The scientific approach and the transparency with which he explains his thought



processes and reasoning suggest some sort of professional objectivity, which Marcus might intend as instrument for gaining Matthew's trust. Knowing that Matthew is stressed and at a loss for a solution, Marcus wants to show Matthew that he is the right person to help him out of trouble, that he has the necessary experience and expertise to find the reason for the problem. Hence, after he has already shown his willingness to improve the customer's problem by driving to him, it appears that he also intends to portray his ability to improve the customer's situation, i.e. find the reason for the problem.

In interpreting the salesperson's attempt to create value for the customer, I propose that Marcus investigates the reason for the claim based on the interpretation that the customer's main goal is to understand the reasons behind the problem. Marcus seems to consider the understanding of the problem as the main improvement for the customer's situation and it is his expertise that enables him to help the customer, which is why he maintains his expert image throughout the interaction. Hence, the *salesperson's attempt to create value in this excerpt of the interaction is to enable the customer to solve the own problem by rendering the problem transparent and understandable for the customer throughout the interaction*. These acts put the customer into a position where he or she feels able to reach an informed decision.

## Doing Quick Fixes

This subchapter deals with interactions that are similar in that the customer portrays him or herself to be in a problematic situation, and in that the salesperson assumes the helper role. And just as argued before, it seems that what makes the interaction valuable for the customer are the salesperson's acts that maneuver the customers out of their worrying situation. However, what the customer defines to be an improved situation differs. The reason for the customers' uncertainty does not seem to be that they do not know the reason why they perceive they are in trouble, but that they are not able to get themselves out of the situation alone in the face of time pressure and lacking access to the necessary resources.

*Interaction one*

*... (the interaction continues)*

*Matthew indicates that he is in considerable trouble because the customer does not want to see the packaging arrive this way again, but some new pallets are already ready to leave the production. Marcus proposes Matthew to use more stretching foil, to wrap them a few more times with the machine before sending them out and then get in touch with the customer to see if the outcome is better. Matthew does not seem to be satisfied with this proposition and asks if there is any other possibility for him to improve something right now, for example to use stabilizing paper corners around the four edges of the lower boxes on the pallet that might prevent the deformation. Marcus says that it is a good idea but that it might be a challenge to get them that quickly and that SCAP does not produce them. However, he says that he could try to help to get them, and if Matthew decides to do that he should let him know. Matthew seems happy and thanks Marcus for coming by.*

*The next day Marcus receives a call from Matthew asking him to get the stabilizing corners. After the call Marcus says:*

*‘Wow, why didn’t he tell me directly when we met? Now it’s Friday afternoon, it will be hard to achieve anything. I know the managing director of the company that makes these paper corners very well, so I will try to reach him. If I can’t get through to him until Wednesday, I will have to ask a customer, I know some that has them and we can buy from.’*

With regard to the salesperson’s attempt to create value for the customer in this situation, one could already say that the customer’s situation does not seem to have improved very much by finding the reasons behind the problem. Once he knows about the reasons he tells Marcus again about the urgency of the problem, that the first pallets are already about to leave the production halls but the customer threatened to stop buying if another delivery gets to them in a damaged condition. He does not seem to feel that his situation has improved yet. Instead his comment appears to indicate that his goal is to find a solution, even though less scientific and professional, that fixes the problem right away. Also another proposal to wrap the pallets better does not seem to result in agreement from Matthew who instead proposes his own solution for a quick fix of the problem. These are not interpretations based on what is objectively an improved situation, but it is linked to what I can judge to be the customer’s goal based on the acts and reactions. Matthew has provided Marcus with all different

sources of information so that he could discover the heart of the problem, he turns to Marcus as expert to tell him the reason for the claims and not only how to fix the problem. However, after Marcus has told him, he still does not seem to feel his situation to have improved since he is reluctant to end the meeting and keeps on asking questions.

One interpretation here is that the expert role does not seem to be supported by the customer anymore as it does not encourage satisfactory reactions from the customer who expresses that he needs to have a solution that gets him immediately out of trouble. It could almost be said that Marcus is trying to reestablish the expert role by problematizing the idea with the stabilizing corners proposed by Matthew but at the same time he maintains his helper position by telling him that he could help him if he decides to follow his advice. It could be meant as advice for the customer to act fast. Even so the encounter appears to be left somewhat hanging, Matthew seems to have gotten from the interaction what he wanted when Marcus assures him that he can procure the stabilizing corners. He can count on Marcus to look into the long-term fixes, he can choose to use more stretching foil to wrap around the packaging on the pallets as protection but *he can also call Marcus and ask for the quick fix, which he has assured Matthew to provide if needed. Matthew seems to be convinced that the situation will improve.*

The phone call from Matthew two days later is a continuation of this somewhat open-ended interaction. It is difficult to make sense out of why the customer decides to call Marcus so late about the stabilizing corners when he previously indicated the urgency in solving the problem. It might have been that the customer tried Marcus' first proposal of using more stretching foil but did not feel certain enough about it or that other urgent projects distracted him. Even though Marcus is the one who has reestablished his role as helper at the end of the last encounter and encourages Matthew to call him any time, he seems upset when he gets to act on it after the call from the customer because he fears that the time situation might not allow him to fulfill his helper role ('Now it is Friday afternoon, it will be hard to achieve anything') or only with a considerable effort ('I will have to ask a customer').

I want to interpret Marcus' attempt to create value in his considerable effort to help the customer out of his dilemma. He seems to adapt his lines of action during the interaction in a way that creates satisfactory reactions from the customer. At first, the customer seems to be interested in Marcus' scientific

problem investigation, trying to understand the reasons behind the claim. Later on in the interaction Marcus tells him that he will start looking into a longer-term solution to the problem and when the customer is very explicit about the urgency of the matter, he proposes a quick fix (stretching foil). When Matthew puts forward his own idea, Marcus problematizes the short notice but at the same time offers his help. It seems to be the time pressure perceived by the customer that changes his definition of an improved situation. The short-time frame seems to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the customer to manoeuvre himself out of the situation by ordering the paper corners from a supplier the normal way. The customer seems to need Marcus to get him out of the dilemma and Marcus influences this perception throughout the interaction. In this part of the interaction it is not the expertise that enables Marcus to help the customer but it is *his contacts and network* that enables him to provide Matthew with a quick fix.

### *Interaction two*

Adam's story suggests another situation where the customer is apparently facing a trouble situation and the salesperson's attempt to help the customer lies in finding a quick fix to get the customer out of trouble. This interaction is different from the ones before, because the customer does not portray herself as being in a trouble situation, the context in which they encounter and her acts and reactions leave little doubt that she is facing a situation of distress.

*Adam says he was in a situation where his usual contact person was not there so he got asked to address the marketing from Ge.*

'Mr. Hekel had something that he needed me for but he did not have time so I had to go and talk to his colleague in a different product category. So I knocked on their door for the first time and she snarled at me why I was just walking in like that. She was super condescending towards me. At that moment while we were talking, a packaging claim was on its way in, delivered by one of their suppliers. She looks at the box and it looked so bad, she just throws it at my feet and says 'I am sure you could have done it just as well'. I answered 'No, such good quality, we cannot deliver'. So she looks at me and says that she needs that box right away. I just asked her for a minute and went outside to make a phone call. I went in again and said that I can get it for tomorrow. I was so lucky that they really could supply that box from one day to the next. Since then I do not need to ask for an appointment anymore, and they call me if there is anything.'

This interaction is intriguing because it was not planned by either of the individuals involved to happen, nor did the salesperson or the customer intend this to be the outcome. Being aware of the symbolic interactionist ideas, I do not necessarily expect the outcome to be one that either of the individuals has had in mind at the beginning of the interaction. In this case, however, through the spontaneity of the interaction, that basically came about by chance, the individuals seem to have *no obvious intention at the beginning of the interaction* or, put differently, if there were any, they got changed by the spontaneous incident of the claim turning up just then. The difference is easier to see when looking at the former interaction between Marcus and Matthew, where both individuals had goals in the interaction to help and to be helped from the beginning, which evolved and only slightly changed throughout the interaction until they reached their apparent goals. In this present interaction, the intentions and interests, however, only developed during it. Not having an obvious goal or intention in the interaction also suggests that both individuals have nothing to lose, Adam because he does not know the context and has therefore no established role in their interaction that he might have to sustain or change. And the customer contact because she neither expected nor intended this interaction.

This interaction is different in that the customer does not frame the interaction as help by using words such as ‘*problem*’ or ‘*challenge*’, the opposite seems the case, she uses a rather brutal and condescending way of admitting the interest that *she needs the packaging but without portraying herself in the state of needing help* (throwing the packaging at Adam’s feet). By saying that ‘*surely you could have done it just as well*’ for a packaging that was obviously badly done, her comment appears very sarcastic, but at the same time she seems to appeal to Adam’s ambition to do it better. With the following statement that she ‘*needs that box right away*’ she continues with her line of keeping up the image that she does not need help, that she is not a victim and not dependent on him for help, instead she acts as if she is simply ordering a packaging. Despite her efforts to portray herself as the one who still has the upper hand in their interaction and is not dependent on Adam’s help, the situation itself and the fact that she is so upset about the claim still provides Adam with a strong enough impression that he defines the situation as a problem for the customer. It is likely to be his definition of the situation where he is problem solver giving him the confidence in the interaction which becomes apparent in his ironic answer saying that ‘*such good quality, we cannot deliver*’. It seems to him that the customer is in an obvious dilemma and that he has the choice and the possibility to help. On the

other hand he has nothing to lose since he does not have any expectations to fulfill and he has not done anything wrong, so he does what he admits afterwards to be quite risky, ('I was so lucky'), to promise her that they could make it.

Throughout the interaction it seems rather clear that the customer goal is to get this packaging as soon as possible but in the interaction one gets the impression that she is not in a position to do so herself. Hence, in this interaction Adam *interprets her acts in that he thinks that getting the packaging for her, gets her out of the trouble situation and hence, makes the interaction valuable for her.* In interpreting Adam's acts I can consider his attempt to create value for the customer, to make the interaction valuable for her, in his acts that intended to improve her situation. There could have been many other ways in which Adam could have reacted in this situation, especially considering the customer's arrogance towards him, a proud reaction from Adam would be to leave her with her problem, thinking that she will realize that she should have addressed him differently. Whether it is Adam's ambition here to gain this customer contact or whether it is kindness of wanting to help this person, Adam has chosen to help her out of trouble. That she seems to consider that as valuable I could interpret from her behavior towards him that turned from being arrogant and angry to showing gratitude and respect ('I do not need to ask for an appointment'). The roles of the customer as king and the salesperson as servant that the customer has been trying to enforce on the interaction have been substituted by the salesperson's role as respected and trusted problem solver ('they call me if there is anything').

## Relieving the Customer of Trouble

As I have already interpreted in the interaction between Marcus and Matthew what could also make the interactions with the salesperson for some customers seemingly valuable is the assurance that they will get help and their situation will improve. Since the customers in the interactions of this chapter face a situation of distress and uncertainty in which they turn to the salesperson for help, the salesperson's acts in showing their willingness and ability to help seems to sometimes already be perceived as improvement. The following interaction serves to substantiate this claim.

*Jacob makes this comment in a matter-of-fact tone in the car on the way to the customer while he explains that his customer has called him the evening before asking him to come by the next day to talk about a change that his customer has made with dramatic consequences:*

‘That is sales, one tries to make a good plan and with a single call it is ruined. Usually we meet half way but since he is a bit stressed, we will drive to his office. It is usually a low-maintenance customer so it would not be good to let him down.’

*Jacob neither seems upset about the short-notice request, nor does he appear nervous about what he will have to deal with when he gets to his customer, and he does not even seem the least surprised about the customer’s call for help. His fairly dramatic description of selling in a nutshell that is accompanied with no observable emotions underlines the banality of this incident for him and contrasts it with the sense of urgency that he interprets is being perceived by the customer. While there is reason to argue that the salesperson considers the meeting with the customer as less important than the customer does, the comment illustrates that what seems to be a stressful situation for the customer is a well-known day-to-day experience for the salesperson.*

This comment illustrates the different roles that have been constructed in the short interaction on the phone preceding the actual meeting. By asking for help, the customer places the potential for improving the situation into the salesperson’s hands, and with the salesperson’s gesture of driving to the customer he shows the intention to help, encouraging the customer in his expectations from the salesperson as helper. Interpreting from the comment above, the salesperson seems to feel comfortable in this role, emphasizing that the customer is the one that is stressed and that he does not want to let him down. Especially by underlining the fact that he now drives all the way to the customer instead of meeting half way, Jacob seems to affirm that he considers he is doing the customer a favor who appears to be so stressed mentally and potentially also with time that he is incapable of driving half the way. The comment that relates to the foregoing phone call with the customer seems to support the claim that this salesperson *considers selling to be about helping customers* when they ask for it.

*Jacob elaborates during the car drive that the customer has a seasonal business, where they draw up all contracts in January and have all orders for the year set up. It is a one-man business, a broker between different farmers and supermarkets, providing*

*them with packaging and trays. He says that this situation could mean for the customer that they would have to stop part of the orders that are already in production at SCAP. He says:*

‘It would be simply a catastrophe if we were to make changes now, there are very few reasons why I do not go on holiday but that would be one. (...) He totally relies on us since we are the single supplier. And these are situations where you feel responsible, but I think we can get out of this alright.’

With this comment Jacob is portraying much more urgency than he has done before. The comment suggests an even stronger asymmetry in the interaction between the helper and the one that is being helped. Using the term ‘*single supplier*’ Jacob uses the common association that is made to a strong imbalance and dependency in a supplier relationship. This customer dependency qualifies the new sense of urgency for the salesperson that one gets the impression to be more about his *responsibility in helping the customer* rather than about the own situation and consequences this production change could have for him. Hence, while constructing the sense of urgency, Jacob keeps up the image of the helper that is himself not in a trouble situation and with no need to be helped but that sees the importance and the responsibility in helping his customer.

Another interesting interpretation of Jacob’s statement is the dedication that seems to be expressed by saying that he would skip his holiday if necessary to help the customer out of this trouble. While the first impression was that Jacob does the customer a favor by driving all the way, this statement dramatizes the entire situation and gives voice to the commitment that he feels towards his customer. Intriguing however is that Jacob does not seem to be concerned or upset about the possibility of canceling his holiday. One gets the impression that it goes without saying to help the customer whenever needed, whatever it takes. This impression becomes even stronger when he adds in a matter-of-fact tone that: ‘*My customers know that they can reach me in the middle of the night if they need to.*’

Jacob may want to highlight his care for his customers that he is a good person who is there for his customers when they need him, or intends to express the fact that he is doing his job well. Whichever this may be it seems to confirm the interpretation that I have arrived at throughout Jacob’s statements that it is not only a common aspect of the salesperson’s work to help the customer out of trouble, it is also an accepted practice to *stay highly flexible not only in the day-to-*



day work planning but also in private life in order to be able to help the customer, that is in order to do the sales job. As Jacob has formulated it later on in the day during a conversation at lunch, if you want to be a salesperson you cannot plan your work around your free time, you have to plan your free time around your work.

*The meeting itself turned out to be surprisingly different from what could be expected after the drama built up by the conversation with Jacob before. Jacob drives to the customer's house where Gert the owner of the one-man business warmly welcomes us. They seem to know each other well and the private frame of meeting at the customer's home for a business issue felt neither new nor awkward for either of them. We sit down at the kitchen table and get coffee and cake. After about an hour of talk about anything but the problem that we came for, Jacob addresses the issue. Gert shows him the new requirements of his customer, including the printing layout. He explains that his customer, the market leading discounter has worked together with SCAP's main competitor on a strategy and the competitor created standard designs and prints for all fruit and vegetable trays for the supermarkets. Gert and Jacob think about how they can minimize the damage. They agree that Gert takes up the discussion with the discounter and the farmers that he supplies the trays to for this discounter that the running packaging production can still be used. But for the order that has not yet started in production, Jacob promises to find a quick way to produce the trays with the print that is required. This conversation takes about twenty minutes before they get back to talking about house and hobbies again and Jacob gets ready to leave.*

Without the insights delivered by Jacob on the way to the customer and afterwards, which highlighted the urgency and sincerity of the meeting, it appeared to be a meeting with the main focus on maintaining a personal dialogue in the relationship. The fact that Jacob changes his initial meetings and drives all the way to the customer, which takes him an entire day, shows, however, that he seems to have the feeling that the customer expects him or at least appreciates him doing it. This is even though the relation of problem solving to small talk in the interaction appears minimal and disproportionate of the effort that the salesperson puts into making the meeting possible. Whether Jacob has felt the same thing or not will remain unclear, he must have perceived, however, that I would have a hard time understanding the purpose of this meeting since he said to me when we were back in the car:

‘Of course that was a very relaxed meeting. I have worked with him for already three years and we have a good connection, we know where we can count on each other and how far we can go, but the big advantage is that you can talk with him. This meeting was important, even if it looked superficial from the outside, but it was really important that we talked about this. Theoretically everything is done from our side on those orders and that could become really expensive for him.’

On a side note, I wonder whether Jacob wants to maintain his role as helper in front of me after the interaction seems to be much more about two people finding out together how they can solve the problematic situation. And both of them, Gert and Jacob, actually leave the meeting with a problem to solve. While Gert has to deal with one of the packaging designs that is already in production by convincing his customer that they could still use it for the present season, Jacob has to find a way to change the design of the one that is not yet in production. It appears as if Jacob tries to justify his visit in front of me, as it might not have seemed as important to the outsider.

But what is more important to discuss here is that Jacob seems to consider this meeting as vital and valuable for the customer not only based on the effort that he made for it but also based on his own comments on it. One such comment is that it *‘could become really expensive for him’*. What *Jacob interprets as valuable for the customer was the meeting as such, the talk, thus the face-to-face conversation that led to the agreement on how to go further with the problem*. Hence, by meeting in person to talk about the problem, the salesperson attempts to create value for the customer, relieving him or her from the stress from facing the trouble, especially since this interaction does not lead to an immediate solution of the problem. Jacob wants to give him the assurance that they will work something out together, or in other words to give the customer the relief of having *someone to share the problem with* or in other words handing the problem over to the salesperson.

One could argue that when the interactions start with the customer asking the salesperson for help and the salesperson signals the willingness to come to assistance by driving to the customer, cancelling other meetings to be there when it is urgent, then the customer influences the salesperson’s problems situation by sharing the information. The customer knows that the willingness to help on the part of the salesperson is embedded in the customer’s importance for the salesperson; hence, the rest of uncertainty of the customer lies in the

ability of the salesperson to help. That the interactions above came about assured the customer about the salesperson's willingness to help, however the interaction itself served for the customer to do everything from their side that can *influence the salesperson's ability to improve their situation*.

## Defining Customer Problems

In all the above-discussed interactions the customer's situation of uncertainty and trouble is unrelated to the direct interaction with the salesperson and it is the customer who described the own situation as problematic or troublesome to the salesperson. Since however, salespeople influence with their acts in the interaction the customer's definition of the own situation and the interaction (also vice versa), they could influence the customer's problem perception. While influencing the customer's problem definition, the salesperson at the same time portrays him or herself as problem solver or helper.

### *Interaction one*

*In the car on the way to the customer meeting, Jacob tells me that he has been working with customer Na for a long time already. He knows the owner through private connections and gets along well with the purchasing manager. He wants to show Hugo, the purchasing manager, the new bag-in-box design that he has already used with another customer before, since he thinks that it could also be interesting for customer Na. Once we get there we have to wait for a while in the entrance hall before the purchasing manager comes and leads us into a small meeting room without windows. In the first half of the meeting Jacob informs Hugo about the price increases caused by an increase in paper prices. They have a discussion around the prices but this part of the conversation is finalized very quickly with Hugo partially accepting and partially stating that he needs to check and compare them before accepting them. In the following part of the meeting, Jacob pulls out a plastic liner for the new bag-in-box design and starts talking about the advantages of this design.*

Jacob: 'This means changing from the tubular bag, it has become angular. Here, you can easily see it does not have the long seam here so it cannot break or burst that easily and it adjusts perfectly to the box.'

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

J: 'Yes, these are samples. So because it adjusts better we need less static that means we could reduce the quality of the box material.'

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

J: '50-55 per cent.'

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

J: 'Yes, one could have suspected that. But if you can save on the paper quality, we emerge plus minus zero, and if you then get a better visual appearance and overall quality for the packaging then we have won something. You cannot compare only the liner prices.'

H: 'No, sure, we cannot compare it one on one, we have to see the whole picture.'

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

H: '...at the borderline, yes.'

J: 'If we emerge plus minus zero and they stand properly on the pallet and are not borderline any more than we make a good deal!'

(Followed by more specific questions about the liner)

J: 'So we cannot say we use this liner and save 30% that is not the aim, the aim is to optimize on the whole package.'

H: 'Sure, if we can improve it that would be good.'

J: 'We need to achieve the situation with neutral costs but that your customer has an advantage. We can try that together, if it works pricewise then we should experiment with a trial order of 2000-3000 for testing.'

H: 'We just have to try out 1-2 pallets once and put them in our storage.'

*The interaction between Jacob and Hugo ended in an agreement to try out the first five samples that Jacob brought along, fill them with milk and store them. In the next step the customer then wanted to order some of the bag-in-box packaging with the new liner, store them and drive them around in a truck, to test the potential improvement.*

The interaction between Jacob and Hugo seems in many ways to portray what one would consider to be a typical sales interaction: Jacob brings along a new product idea and presents the advantages and benefits that the customer would get from using it. Also the roles that Jacob and Hugo seem to take on suggest those images of the typical buyer and seller as in the interaction of Oscar and Philip, Jacob comes to the customer registers at the reception and waits in the entrance hall. While he waits he tells me something about the pictures hanging in the hall showing the generations of the owners of the family business and mentions that it is always an obligatory 5 minute that the purchaser lets the salesperson wait. When the purchaser comes, he leads us into a small, sterile room without offering coffee, and Jacob starts unpacking a price list and explains Philip the increase of raw material prices which means that he has to increase the packaging prices (EuWit). All these activities indicate a rather typical salesperson-customer relationship marked by the expected power relations that become manifest in the obligatory 5 minutes of waiting time and the customer using the reservation of comparing the price that the salesperson asks for with other supplier prices before accepting.

Hence, while I know from Jacob that they have a long-term and personal relationship with this customer and his boss, the interaction does not necessary let us assume an informal relationship, since both seem to keep up the formal roles of their professional context. It does, however, seem to play an important role, firstly because without the relationship, hence previous interactions, Jacob would not have gotten the impression of the customer's problem being one concerning quality. And secondly, judging from the impression that Hugo seems to be influenced by Jacob rather easily, Hugo's experience with previous interactions seems to make Hugo confident in Jacob's good will to help in the customer's interest.

It is, however, intriguing how in this interaction Jacob seems to create the necessity of *'improvement'*, by comparing the current situation as *'problematic'* with the potential of improvement in the form of *'winning something'* and *'optimizing the whole packaging'*. As an answer to Hugo's first reactions circling around cost concerns ('it would be good if we could save there', 'that is twice as much'), Jacob uses very descriptive language ('plus minus zero') to give Hugo the feeling that nothing changes in the price, which he seems so concerned about. But at the same time he mentions the *'better visual appearance'* and the *'overall quality'* to let the plus-minus calculation in cost stand next to the image

of an improvement for the customer. It seems striking that Jacob uses this tactic three times throughout the entire conversation. He twice uses the image of a plus-minus zero situation, once he uses the term '*neutral*', and each time he opposes this situation with words that symbolize improvement, such as '*better visual and quality*', '*properly on the pallet*' and '*not borderline anymore*' as well as '*advantage*'. Besides using terminology that has a rather established symbolic meaning of improvement, Jacob also tries to influence the customer in seeing and acknowledging his own problem ('If we can agree...') and the customer seems to play along in the interaction ('...at the borderline, yes', 'Sure, if we can improve it that would be good.').

Based on these interpretations of the interaction, I suggest that this interaction is different from those discussed in this chapter so far, as it is not the customer that defines the own situation as problematic in the interaction by asking for help or describing the own situation by using terms such as '*problem*'. In this interaction *it is the salesperson who seems to influence the customer's definition of the own situation in the interaction*. I do not suggest that Jacob told Hugo something that he did not know about, rather the interaction indicates that Hugo has had a different perception of what would improve his situation, that is cost saving rather than quality improvement. Together with influencing the customer's definition of improvement, it looks as though Jacob intends to create an image of a joint improvement effort, where Jacob helps Hugo to improve the own situation. Jacob refers to '*we*' throughout the entire interaction: '*we have won something*', '*we emerged plus minus zero*', '*we have made a good deal*', '*we need to achieve the situation*' and '*we can try that together*'. In this part of the interaction, it also appears as if the power relationship has balanced out. Jacob tells Hugo what he cannot do, i.e. compare the prices of the lines, and Hugo repeats it ('No, sure, we cannot compare it one on one ...') as if he is trying to make up for his price conscious remark ('That is twice as much as the current one').

The salesperson might attempt to create value for the customer because in this case he interprets the customer's problem to be the quality, based on previous interactions with the customer, and he thinks that improving this situation is valuable for the customer. Objectively speaking one could also argue that a quality improvement for the customer's customer is likely to be valuable to the customer as well since it is likely to increase satisfaction and decrease potential claims from the customer's customer. However, based on the interpretation, *I argue that the salesperson actively influences what symbolizes value for the customer*

*throughout the interaction, based on what he considers to be valuable for the customer. Moreover, with influencing the customer in what is valuable, he also creates the opportunity for value creation in this interaction to be about improving the customer's situation and his own role as helper or problem solver for the customer to improve the own situation. In comparison with the interactions above, this interaction seems to portray an inverse process of influencing the customer's definition of value, and therewith creating the own opportunity for making the customer feel that the interaction is valuable. And that again is valuable for the salesperson as discussed in the previous subchapter, because it substantiates the salesperson's role as helper and the customer's dependency.*

### *Interaction two*

The interpretation of a second interaction serves to substantiate the above claims with the interpretation of another empirical interaction.

*Hans brings samples of the magic corner display, an innovation that is patented by SCAP, to the meeting with Mark, marketing manager of a prospective customer, LM. The meeting was set up by the salesperson responsible for the geographical area because he thought that the customer could be interested in this display innovation based on the current product presentation in the shops. When he gets to the customer's office, he presents himself, builds up the sample display and starts explaining it.*

Hans: (...) 'After learning about your product presentation in the market, we think that there is potential for the magic corner display to improve it.'

Mark: 'OK?'

H: (*explains the benefits with the help of the sample he brought along*) 'This modularity is what we thought is also important for your product presentation.'

M: 'Definitively.'

H: 'Because especially in gas stations there is little space.'

M: 'OK that is not our main business.'

H: 'But then in ATU [shop chain for car spare parts] and those kinds of shops.'

M: 'Exactly.'

(Further explanation about the innovation)

H: 'Yes, so we had the print, stability, and most importantly the fact that every product can be presented individually, because at the moment yours is sorted in a way that there is only one article type in every tray.'

M: 'I could live with this problem since our customer is used to it, but it was easier before when we had a smaller variety of products, now we have 10-12 different articles...But so far we have always used the product as supporting object, that restricts me in that every display has to be sorted in the same article type and not only every tray. There we still have no proper system that enables us to do this without too much effort, because it needs to make sense, the display might only be used twice and then it is thrown out. And then the other problem is how the shop floor workers treat the displays. But where you are right is that we have no possibility to say, for example, down here in the display I have the 50 liter, there my 10 liter, we do not have that, that's correct. Are the sizes variable?'

H: 'Yes.'

M: (*gets a few product samples and starts arranging them into one of the trays*) 'OK, let's see here. We always put them in two rows because that is the requirement from the stores. It would be nice for us if we only had one tray with the modularity system; right now we have two because of the different product sizes. The next issue is the transport, now this is great but we have different product sizes and therefore different display sizes. We have space left and right of the pallet, so it's moving around. Ideally the display should stand by itself.'

H: 'OK, we would have to think this through.'

M: 'Yes, it took a while with the old displays until we figured out a way where they do not move around during transport.'

*Hans asks some more details about the current display, the amount of products, the height, the assembly and packaging locations. They agree that Mark sends product samples to the SCAP design center and once they get there, Hans will meet the designers to think about how the display innovation could be fitted to the customer's product so that they take up the space of a fourth of a pallet and do not move around during transport.*

In this interaction the individuals also recreate the traditional image of selling with a salesperson presenting a product and the customer wondering if he needs it. I interpret this interaction along the same lines as the one between Jacob and Hugo, where the salesperson brings along a product sample that signifies an improvement idea, and the salesperson influences the customer's problem definition throughout the interaction. In this interaction the problem is, however, negotiated throughout the interaction. While they agree early in the



interaction the improvement to be in the product presentation (Hans: ‘...important for your product presentation’, Mark: ‘Definitively.’), the perception of what exactly the problem is differs:

H: ‘Because especially in gas stations there is little space.’

M: ‘OK, that’s not our main business.’

And

H: ‘...because at the moment yours is sorted in a way that there is only one article type in every tray.’

M: ‘I could live with this problem since our customer is used to that, ...’

*Until Mark actually formulates his problem in relation to the solution:*

‘... But so far we have always used the product as a supporting object, that restricts me in that every display has to be sorted in the same article type and not only every tray. There we still have no proper system that enables us to do this without too much effort, ... And then the other problem is how the shop floor workers treat the displays. But where you are right is that we have no possibility to say, for example, down here in the display I have the 50 liter, there my 10 liter, we do not have that, that’s correct.’

As mentioned above, this interaction could be interpreted just as the one above, as it is Jacob who starts the interaction with a customer improvement idea in mind, presented in the form of what he communicates at the beginning of the interaction (‘...improve your product presentation in the market’). This interaction almost suggests that while the notion of improvement is established at the beginning of the interaction, the problem definition is subject to negotiation throughout the interaction. But within this frame it seems that the customer eventually defines the own problem with regard to this improvement definition. The interaction could therefore be interpreted as another illustration for an interaction where salespeople have a notion of how they think they can make the interaction valuable for the customer either pre-established through interpretations from previous interactions or influenced through interactions with managers and internal trainings on ideal ways of selling. If the customer cooperates he or she might agree on the improvement and problem definition and therewith support the salesperson’s role as helper in interaction, making the improvement or solving the problem that the customer wants him or her to do and is likely to appreciate.

## Keeping up the Helper Image

Playing the helper in these interactions of this chapter is not only an attempt to improve the customer's situation but could also be interpreted as an attempt to make the interaction valuable for the salesperson. The imbalance of the helper-helped relationship where the customer faces trouble creates a dependency asymmetry in favor of the salesperson. The customer in these interactions is uncertain about how to cope with the own situation and the salesperson can demonstrate commitment and competence towards the customer when helping. These helping acts often seem to influence the customer's perception of the salesperson's role as expert and helper, which might be accompanied by trust and gratitude.

*One of the aspects that has already been mentioned before in the interaction between Jacob and Gert is the dedication that the salesperson needs to display in his day-to-day work. As Jacob describes it, he is available day and night, and salespeople need to prioritize the customer's needs over their own. It seems that many salespeople have accepted the flexibility as a self-evident part of their job:*

'Mr. Hautz from the technical department starts at half past six, marketing starts at ten, some are finished at five, others at ten in the evening. They don't care when you get up. They want to get a hold of you. That means that this little thing [blackberry] is always with me, at dinner, my son and my wife got used to it.' (David)

Also in the interactions above it is often the salesperson's flexibility and availability that enables the salesperson to actually play the helper role and meet the customer when they are in trouble. These salespeople therefore consider it an important part of their work because it seems to enable them to play the role of the helper and hence create value for the customer by helping them to improve their situation. Hence, while salespeople usually have to face the ever-present dependency on the customer's willingness to cooperate in order to legitimate their occupation, the role of being the helper lets them experience a temporary inverse relationship dependency. The following interaction is interpreted in terms of the salesperson's importance to establish and maintain this helper image. The first part of the excerpt is Adam's reconstruction of the interactions with customer SC that preceded the one observed, which forms the second part.

### *Interaction one*

*After the first meeting with SC, Adam has realized that SCAP cannot meet the customer's need with all its requirements at the aspired price level for the packaging that they asked for. Adam explains that even though he was not really interested at that time, he asked the customer about the conventional brown boxes, their transport packaging. The customer mentioned that they are currently facing some challenges. A week later, Adam got a phone call from the customer who asks him to come by. Adam says that when he was in the hall where the products are packed in for dispatch, he realized that the quality of the brown boxes was bad that the tape with which they close the packages did not hold. This has caused problems in the dispatching of the goods. Adam pointed out to the customer that there is no consistency in the quality of the brown bags, that there are three different qualities on a pallet. This meeting resulted in further meetings and first trial orders by SCAP to the customer, there were still only two trial deliveries left before contract signature. However, just before the second trial delivery, the contact person at SC changed and he has not heard from the customer anymore for a while.*

*Adam mentions that a new contact has called now and complained about the price increase of the last offer. Adam said that he suggested a meeting in order to talk about the prices and to clarify the status when the project was interrupted; this has initiated the observed meeting.*

'She asked why we got more expensive and I tried to explain to her the raw material situation and paper price increase. She said she cannot understand that, and then she got upset with the fact that we only have a price validity of 4 months. I told her we can have a different agreement such as a EuWit<sup>5</sup> formula, and she said, "What EuWit?", at that moment I knew it would get tough. I told her I will write her something about it and that it would be good to meet about this.'

*The abrupt breaking of the contact and the phone call with the new contact seem to have left Adam very skeptical and not very positive towards the future development of this customer.*

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<sup>5</sup> Price index of the packaging industry that adjusts the packaging price for raw material price changes.

‘So basically the last nine months of the year were for nothing and that is not OK. Now I just have to see, I won’t prepare. I just go there and listen to what she has to say, and explain to her what has happened, then I will listen to what she wants and decide afterwards if I continue with this or not.’

*The observed meeting is very short, they only sit together for about 5-10 minutes at the entrance hall and the new contact, Marie, goes through the new SCAP offer. Adam starts talking about what happened in the last interaction between him and the previous customer contact. Throughout the entire meeting she leads the conversation, keeps it very short and does not try to make any conversation with Adam. She only addresses the payment conditions of SCAP in the contract that are not in line with those of SC and asks him whether he could arrange for those of SC. After Adam says that he does not see a problem, she seems satisfied, asks him to continue with the second trial delivery that was still in the pipeline for the project and excuses herself for having to leave again. After the meeting, Adam says to me that it was a waste of time to drive all the way, because all of a sudden the prices were not an issue anymore and she only had a question about the terms and conditions.*

The main focus in this interpretation should not lie on the actual observed interaction, which is why it is not reported here in detail, but on Adam’s story and commentary. Even though Adam says that he was not particularly interested at that time, he still had the curiosity or enough interest in offering himself as problem solver. By asking how the other packaging was going, he showed genuine interest and opened up for the customer to let him know if there was anything they customer needed him for. Hence, one could argue that the salesperson gave the customer a platform to formulate a problem for him.

At first, it seems strange that Adam does not appear satisfied with the last interaction after he reached the goal that he seemed to have at the beginning of the interaction with the customer, that is to build up a new relationship and get into supply position. Even though it maybe unlikely that this overall goal of Adam has changed, he seemed disappointed with the entire course of interactions with this customer and especially this last meeting. Besides the frustration that he expresses in his statement about what he is planning to do in the coming interaction, he also portrays himself to be in the position of choice (‘I just go there and listen to what she has to say...’). He apparently wants to give the impression that he does not need this customer. His statement suggests that the development of the interaction damaged his pride because he helped the customer solve the problem and once he had the possibility to get something out

of the interaction, the meeting ended without any comment. They did not show any willingness to cooperate, to take into consideration his interests as well and did not bother explaining this. It appears that with the way he formulates his plan he wants to establish his position not to be dependent on the customer, having the choice to cooperate or not. One could interpret this statement *as a reconstruction of his power position that he had before in the interaction with the customer when he came to help the customer out of trouble.*

Against this background, Adam's disappointment can be understood after the interaction since he did not seem to be able to fulfill his goals with the interaction. The new customer contact hardly allowed him to talk or elaborate on anything and she did not want to learn about the different pricing options. She only wanted Adam's agreement on the different terms and conditions and was not interested in anything else. Hence, neither could he establish a better personal contact with her for future interactions nor could he explain things to her that he considers could have made the interactions in future easier for him. But on top of that *by pushing her interests in the interactions through, it seems that she has established her position of power in the relationship.* She got out of the interaction what she wanted and ended it once she had done so. But it also means that Adam feels that he has lost his position of choice since she basically asked him to continue the trial orders directly. With a direct customer request for an order, however, Adam is in a much harder position for deciding not to continue with her.

Another interpretation is that Adam's disappointment seems to be related to the fact that he could not reconstruct his image of the helper or problem solver. While he has built up this image with the previous customer contact who has addressed him and asked him to come by, the course of action with the customer leads to a new customer contact that does not know or does at least not show any interest in the previous events. Adam interprets her behavior in this interaction and the ones before as lack of respect and appreciation or gratitude for his help and he *seems to feel that he got put back into the position of the usual supplier that has to accept the terms and conditions of the purchaser and has to adapt his actions to whatever the customer wants and asks him for.*

# Chapter Eight - Reducing Customer Workloads

The interactions in this chapter are different from the ones above in that the customer does not appear to shape the interaction by telling the salesperson what to do or by asking for something particular. The salesperson's acts do not seem to be an obvious reaction to the customer's immediate acts or reactions in the present interaction. Instead the salesperson's acts seem to be based on what they *imagine to be of value for the customer*. This conception appears to be based on his or her experience of which acts throughout previous interactions have created positive reactions from the customer, or on role taking, thus adopting the customer's perspective. Many of the salesperson's acts in this chapter seem to be working routines that have become established over the course of the relationship since the salesperson as well as a customer form interpretations via their own perspective and these also are consistently retained across different interactions.

In the interactions of this chapter salespeople seem to act based on their assumption *that relieving the customer from their workload makes the interaction valuable for the customer*. Hence, in the attempt to create value for the customer, the salesperson takes on the customer's work responsibilities, provides special services or manages projects for the customer. The salesperson might take on the role of an assistant doing administrative work, such as reporting or ordering for the customer, or they might drive the samples to the customer so that the latter does not need to handle the matter internally. All these short episodes show that the salesperson often takes on work that would usually be conducted by the customer and that does not necessarily fit into the management's image of ideal selling. They think that many of their customer contacts are very busy and feel stressed at their place of work to achieve maximum results and therefore appear grateful to have someone who does not cause them extra trouble but instead is even willing to support them in their daily work.

The interactions and stories suggest that the salespeople put a great deal of commitment and dedication into their daily work when doing this extra work for the customer. However, they consider the value not only for the customer in these acts, but also for themselves. One gets the impression that these activities enable them to *differentiate* themselves from the other competing salespeople knowing that the customer appreciates their efforts. By taking on more responsibilities doing the little bit extra work, they are more involved in the customer's day-to-day business and make themselves more special thus potentially *indispensable*.

## Taking on Work Responsibilities

The following interactions and salesperson's comments I interpret as attempts to make the interactions valuable for the customer by facilitating the customer's day-to-day work that is related to the salesperson's interactions. Based on the way of working that the salesperson has established over the years with the customer, it seems that the salesperson assumes that making everything related to the sales encounter to cause as little work as possible for the customer is appreciated.

### *Interaction one*

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

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

Even though the reports are evidently also David's own tool to keep track and monitor work responsibilities, he considers this task as more important for the customer and judging from his comment he seems to be very sure that the customer really appreciates it ('they are happy'). His interpretation of reduced workload to symbolize value for the customer seems partially based on common-sense thinking, that '*humans are naturally lazy*', so every occasion when their workload is made lighter is appreciated but also *based on his imagination of what he would consider valuable if he was in their position*. He says that they have a lot to do and that corrugated paper '*is only one part of their concept*'. The relationship that he creates with the customer by considering them all as '*humans*', suggests that he imagines it to be easier for the customer and valuable to get more support and reduced workload.

Viewing his last comment, however, '*It is not because they like me so much*', in the light of the context that David has about 150 contacts in this customer company and makes the most turnover of all salespeople in the company, suggests that David considers his success as a signal for the customer's appreciation of his support. Hence, *another reason why he considers the day-to-day support valuable for the customer is his impression of what seems to work, i.e. what is evaluated positively by the customer*. That his interpretation of what is valuable for the customer is also based on previous reactions throughout the customer interactions is substantiated when interpreting the following excerpt, which is part of the interaction between Elisabeth and David that I concluded in Chapter 6, where they talk about the workshop preparations.

E: 'Don't come again with something like the material numbers the other day! You are very welcome to change something when it means savings for us.'

D: 'I know.'

E: 'If there are no cost savings for you, nor for us, primarily for us I mean...'

D: 'I understand!'

E: 'I promise, you won't be able to leave our carpark anymore because of four flat tires!'

D: 'I know!'

E: 'I had to create new specifications in the system, where I get no benefit and only a lot of work.'



*Later on in the car David explains to me that Elisabeth was really upset and that it all happened because of a SCAP internal miscommunication. He said that his internal sales colleague did not keep him up to date even though David told him that he wanted to be informed about everything that is going on with customer Ne. Regarding Elisabeth, he mentions that she got her job at customer Ne through a temporary employment agency and that in his view she does not know much about the technical issues of her work:*

‘You have to do her work she doesn’t care. Her value of my person lies in the fact that she knows that we do the work, that it runs smoothly and that her boss gets a good impression of her’.

Elisabeth’s statements express how upset she seems to be: *‘Don’t come again...’* and *‘I get no benefit and only a lot of work’*, and she seems to blame David for the reason of her anger (‘you won’t be able to leave our carpark anymore because of four flat tires’). Knowing the context, one can understand that while she uses words for a threat, she means it as a joke. They have worked together for a long time, and when looking back at the interaction discussed before, Elisabeth wants to cancel another supplier in order to work more with David, but the reason seems to be exactly that he creates more work for her:

‘No, but I want you guys to take this on, I will also fight this through in the purchasing department. I do not want to work with them anymore. I have enough work here. I haven’t got the time to tell someone how to build up a basic foundation. And when there is anything about the print they tell me something about colors that they cannot print. I don’t want to work with them anymore.’

While Elisabeth might not be really angry with David, she certainly seems frustrated and seems to want to demonstrate this for David. The short conversation and her comment about the supplier nourish the impression that she dislikes having extra work and how important it is for her to be trouble-free. She wants David to take care of things and be able to rely on him doing it right so that she neither needs to get involved in everything nor bother thinking about it. Throughout the years of working together Elisabeth seems to have developed a lot of trust in David, knowing she can rely on him doing his work well and to her satisfaction. Having the work taken care of and the peace of mind not having to be worried about it seems of particular importance to her, to a point that she is happy to become more dependent on David by giving him more work and cancelling other suppliers.

David does not seem surprised about her frustrated expressions but even appears not to feel the need to try to justify what has happened. At that point in the conversation he seems only to want her to get the feeling that he understands that she is upset. In his statement afterwards the interpretations and claims from before become explicit when he says that *the value in his person is that she can be assured that the work is done and she does not need to take care of anything.*

### *Interaction two*

*Every Monday, George drives to Klaus, the purchasing manager from company Fru where they talk about delivery statuses, new orders, and the business in general. Without any registration we enter the office building, walk through an open office where George says hello to several people, into a separate office with the purchasing manager.*

Klaus: 'What do you want to sell us today, eh?' (*smiling*)

(George does not react to the question but tells him about a truckload that is on its way to the customer but needs to call on another customer first before it gets there. Klaus asks about the delivery of a specific packaging.)

G: 'They are in production and ready most likely on Thursday. I can only tell you tomorrow because they start the program today. But Ralf [SCAP internal sales colleague] entered the order into the system and has an eye on it.'

K: 'OK.'

G: 'I will let you know tomorrow, but there is no way that they will be done by tomorrow. The 10 kilo packaging comes tomorrow morning.'

K: 'OK, because they are empty.'

G: 'Yes, they're on the way. I asked Kirsten [customer Fru internal sales colleague], she said seven in the morning is OK. I took care of that on Friday. I am constantly lacking trucks. I do not know why but I guess we [SCAP] have been saving when there was less demand for freight forwarding and we put the routes out for tender on the internet. And now when we have more work again, they say that they are not interested to drive all the way out here for that money.'

K: 'Yes sure, as long as I have it tomorrow morning, I'm happy.'

G: 'OK, so we go through the list once. OK, 10 kilo, then here's a new order, this one I schedule for the 28th, so that it's done by Monday. Or should I take this one earlier instead? Wouldn't be a problem.'

K: 'That needs to be done tomorrow.'

G: 'OK.'

*They continue going through the list and change rather quickly to talk about the general development of the packaging industry, the changes that happen in the supermarket requirements for trays and finally about the holiday that Klaus is planning. George tells me afterwards that they go through the list every Monday, but what they decide on Monday can already look different by Wednesday because the customer's business is moving fast. Sometimes they just call his internal sales contacts and say that they need ten pallets of a certain tray right now. He explains that the customer can only plan 50%, which is why SCAP has to work with storage and needs to be really flexible. As this is, however, not always the case, he says, he sometimes has to plan things according to his experience and own risk. George also tells me afterwards that should one of the farmers, the customer's customers, want a new packaging, Klaus sends George to discuss the packaging design. George says that this would usually not be his responsibility, but Klaus expects that from his suppliers. He says that it is important for Klaus to know that the salespeople from his suppliers can work with the farmers who are, according to George, not easy clients. He also says that he might soon be the only salesperson for this customer, since the one from the other supplier retires soon, and Klaus told him that it is not easy to find someone with the experience needed to send them to the farmers. George is sure that the successor to the salesperson will have a very hard time and that Klaus will probably give him more orders, but he also says that SCAP is not big enough to be the single supplier for this customer. George keeps his Mondays free in order to meet Klaus and to stay flexible in case he gets sent to one of the farmers.*

Judging from the way Klaus and George communicate one could suspect that they have been working together for a rather long time already. Firstly, George just walks straight into the office of the purchasing manager without talking to the lady at the reception or any of his colleagues sitting in the open space office in front of the manager's office. Moreover, the way they get straight into talking about ordering, when George pulls out a list and Klaus gives short answers in between *portrays a routinized way of working, which they have established over time*. Finally, one could interpret the small talk about holidays as common to every sales encounter, but since the topic is rather personal, not for example about cars or football, it indicates that they have been talking about their families before. Additionally, George's talk about the customer afterwards does not only reveal that he seems to know the customer rather well but also that he has a particular way of working with him, that is to drive there every Monday, to stay flexible in case he has to visit a farmer, and to maneuver orders around.

Against this background, one could also perceive the first comment of Klaus as ironic, as he knows that George comes every Monday and it is usually not about selling a product. But it also appears as if the roles are set straight with this comment, as he portrays George as the salesperson who knocks on doors and sells products. George, however, either seems to be used to the comment and feels the need to play along with the irony, or he is annoyed with this image and prefers to ignore it as a way of not negotiating it. But even if George did not come to sell a product, the interaction substantiates the roles rather clearly. The lengths of their statements in the conversation could be another indication to interpret their role division, while George explains the order statuses and informs Klaus, Klaus' comments are only to agree or confirm or make a short request.

The content of the interaction could be split into two aspects, the informing of Klaus about orders and the information gathering of George in order to plan the orders. In general, however, this interaction seems to be about ordering from Klaus' side and order management on the part of George. Taking a step back from this interaction, however, one might wonder why George drives to Klaus every Monday to take orders from him, something Klaus could just as well do over the phone with internal sales. Having said that, this is the procedure for most customers and salespeople, where repeat orders are placed via the responsible internal sales colleagues.

George's comment afterwards seems to explain why he goes through the order list every Monday with this customer. He says that this customer is special because they work so extremely flexibly with those who purchase from them, which means that they need their suppliers to be flexible. He seems to consider it as a requirement from the customer to work very flexibly. However, it looks as if it is very important that he himself is the flexible actor in contact with Klaus, not relying on the internal sales colleagues but preferring to manage matters himself. He seems to be rather confident that Klaus appreciates his way of working as he also says that he might soon be the only salesperson selling to Klaus because the successor of the colleague from the competition will not have the experience and skills needed for working with this customer.

The interaction suggests the seriousness and care with which George works with the orders, something that seems to be an administrative, rather mundane task that he carries out at his own risk, when he thinks that SCAP can otherwise not deliver in time. These acts could be *interpreted as doing the work for the customer,*

*taking on responsibilities that might not usually be the salesperson's*, whether they are usually done by the customer or the internal salespeople. This is what George considers as *making the interaction valuable for Klaus*, so valuable that he thinks he is indispensable. It seems that in his view Klaus' appreciation of his worth and the interaction lies in Klaus' lighter workload, the relief of not having to deal with the administrative issues himself.

## Doing Small Favors

The salesperson's acts in this interaction do not highlight the general taking over of work responsibilities from the customer but instead illustrate the day-to-day support that the salesperson gives the customer in the attempt to make the customer's work life easier.

### *Story one*

'This one purchasing manager, he was at work once when everyone else in the department was on holiday. I saw that he sat there totally desperate, so I offered to help him and I sat there for four hours with him checking invoices. Just then, I helped him, and I helped him to deal with the internal problem that he had.' (Adam)

Different from the interactions above, it does not seem that helping the customer with the invoices became part of his way of working over the course of interactions with this customer. It seemed instead to be a spontaneous decision on Adam's part based on his interpretation of the situation as problematic for the customer. Adam interprets the situation in that his contact would not appreciate just then if he followed the usual procedures of talking about the current display project or other issues. He feels that by doing that he would add to the customer's stress. In his statement, Adam highlights the stressful position that the customer was in at that time ('totally desperate') and thereby establishes his role as helper in this story ('I offered to help him'). One can assume from the story that the customer contact did not ask for help, also because the customer's stressful situation is due to an '*internal problem*' and unrelated to the interaction with the salesperson. Hence, it is not based on the interpretation of the customer's acts towards Adam that he decided to help, since the customer does not portray his situation as problematic or himself in the need of help from Adam.

One reason for Adam's decision to help could be the experience that he gained through former interactions with this customer contact. He might have been in similar situations before and knows from *experience* that the customer has appreciated it when he did not just carry on with normal business but instead helped him in a difficult situation. Another reason for his change of intended action could also be that he imagined himself in the situation of the contact just then and tried to understand from his perspective what would be valuable in that situation. Hence, through the act of *role taking* he evaluated the help with the invoices to be more valuable than carrying on with the business.

The story suggests that while Adam seems to have a different intention and goal with the interaction, he decided to change his planned action and adapt it to what he thinks to be more appreciated by the customer, whether this interpretation is based on role taking or experience. Hence, *while the customer's goals or intentions with the interaction do not seem obvious, the salesperson is still confident that his acts would create positive reactions from the customer* ('just then I helped him'). Since Adam seems to set aside his intentions with the interaction, one could consider his helping as an empathic gesture; Adam meets someone he knows and feels the urge to help him out of a predicament. But since it is a customer contact of Adam, the interpretation seems more convincing that *Adam attempts to make this interaction valuable for the customer by helping him in his own day-to-day work dealing with his 'internal problems'*.

### *Story two*

*On the third day Adam picks up two displays at a SCAP plant and brings them as display samples to the customer; he explains himself:*

'I drive there only to bring the samples. Sure, you could say it is only a postman's job, but the discussions are important because you can already talk about details and make it easier for the customer. One should not just see the financial side but also the personal one.'

*He says that sometimes he feels like a postman and that colleagues at the plant make fun of him. But he knows that it works. He considers it very important that the customer does not just receive the sample by post, but that he is there to explain it and to answer potential questions. Adam tells me that even though his other customer Ri did not seem to appreciate it the same way in the beginning as customer Ge, now that he has done it several times, he says that they have started to find the service useful. Adam remembers that last time they expressed afterwards that they were*

*happy that he came by, since it saved them time and they could ask all their questions directly. Adam thinks that these kinds of service are the reason why SCAP has increased sales with this customer over the last year.*

This event seems once again to reflect a routine, a way of working that Adam appears to have established based on positive reactions at previous meetings. He might have gotten the idea of bringing the samples to the customer because he thought that it would facilitate the customer's job; they are spared the trouble of finding the reports or emails concerning the project in order to investigate the sample, write down potential questions and remarks or concerns and contact the salesperson about it ('already talk about details'). The reason that he has established this practice and even transferred it to the meetings with another customer is because of the positive reactions he seems to get from his contacts. While the frequent face-to-face encounters with the customer and the possibility to 'talk about details' are potentially also valuable for the salesperson, Adam's statement suggests that his main intention behind these acts is 'to make it easier for the customer'. Hence, *he established this favor of taking the samples by car to the customer because he judges the positive reactions from the customer to mean that the customer finds it to be valuable.* Adam assumes that the customer appreciates it not only in the light of their positive reactions but he also considers the increased number of projects he is getting to be a sign of their gratitude.

## Managing Projects

For some salespeople much of their work lies in managing and organizing bigger projects internally at the customer contact. This means for the salespeople that they have to handle different stakeholders, hence different interests and opinions within the customer. They seem to handle this challenge either by finding a way to take everyone's concern into account or by addressing only the interests of those contacts that hold the informal power within the customer. Also in these interactions the customer's goals or intentions either differ between the contacts or do not seem particularly clear in the interaction. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that the salesperson fits his or her acts to the customers, creating value by pursuing their apparent goal. Hence, it appears that salespeople have adapted their way of working throughout many interactions in accordance with their

interpretation of customer reactions or what they imagine, through role taking, as being valuable for the customer.

### *Interaction one*

*Christian explains that because the display projects run over such a long time, he has many interactions where he assembles and presents different samples of one display project. In the meeting with the marketing and agency contacts they comment on the appearance of the display for the consumer, how practical it is for their external sales to build it, and they discuss experience from handling of displays in the retail market. Christian presents the thoughts behind the design, the other stakeholders' comments and suggests what can be changed. The observed conversations are all rather technical, slightly depending on the contact persons. In some situations, Christian explains what is possible and what is not, in other situations he engages in a technical dialogue with his contact. When he realizes that time is running short for the project, he shifts dates around and decides to already get the OK from the packaging department in order to speed up the project process, even if there were still some changes to be done at the display.*

The procedure in which Christian runs each and every design project seems to have been established over several years during which he has been working with this customer. *It is a special situation with this customer that the marketing department, the internal advertising agency and the packaging department are located in three different places in Germany, so that Christian has to cover the geographical distance for all his visits. It also seems that these three parties do not necessarily share their ideas or opinions at every stage of a packaging design project. In these interactions they each tell the salesperson their ideas and wishes, they get advice on what is possible to produce and the salesperson goes back to solve any possible conflict with other interests, and has to try to realize the ideas and turn them into a packaging product.* Since one cannot say much about how these acts of managing the projects internally have come about, nor about the customer's reactions, it seems to be a *routine procedure that appears somewhat taken for granted by the parties at this stage.* Hence, it is not known if this way of managing display products was requested by the customer, whether other salespeople with the same customer proceed in the same way, or whether the practice developed step by step over the years.



There are, however, a few things that could be mentioned. Knowing that it is an established and successful relationship, i.e. the salesperson makes a high turnover with this customer, this way of handling projects must have been accepted and appreciated by the different customer contacts over time. Otherwise it is likely that Christian would have adapted his lines of action, which encourage positive reactions from the customer. Moreover, it could be assumed that it is rather unlikely that this procedure has been established from the beginning of the relationship considering the trust that the customer demonstrates in Christian by letting him organize all the projects. In this procedure it is not an internal project manager that has the overview, leads the process, raises concern and has the last word, it seems to be the salesperson. But even more so is the *communicator role* that Christian has between the different stakeholders, *which seems to be what makes him valuable for the customer but also puts him into a very powerful position*. It is powerful because in this case the salesperson is the one who gains most knowledge, by interacting with the different parties he learns about issues that are not known to the other parties. Christian can decide which information to share and hence shape the development and outcome of the project in the way that he considers best. So at the same time that it seems valuable for the customer, it is risky.

Hence, as mentioned before, Christian would probably not have developed this way of working in the interaction with the customer if he did not have the impression that this way of managing the customer's projects by connecting the internal stakeholders is valuable for the customer. If he did not feel that it was appreciated by the customer it is unlikely that he would spend the extra work and time but would have probably rather invested it in something that seemed more important to the customer. One suggestion as to why *the salesperson considers it valuable for the customer is that the different stakeholders are saved the effort that he makes instead*, that is to say, facing different opinions from the other stakeholders, having to discuss and solve conflicts with them, align with their work and follow up the timing of the project.

#### *Interaction two*

*Before we visit the customer, Adam drives by one of the plants and picks up a sample from the design center. Here two designers together with Adam go through the changes that they have done to the sample. Just before Adam leaves, one of them gives Adam a folded paper with the changes that he expects the customer to want. They*

*seem to be amused by the many changes the customer wanted in the past with this same sample. Back in the car Adam tells me about the project that has been running for over a year without any commitment from their side:*

‘We got a briefing when everything started, upon which I made the decision to take on board two people from the design center with different product focus. We had four weeks to think about it, to make sketches and we included an agency. We spent a lot of money. When we met them again, they just said, “Well it all looks really good, but it doesn’t solve our problem”. After I clarified that the specific problem we discussed last time is solved with this display, they just said “Yes that was right, but now things are different”.’

*Adam tells me that it is still not clear which supplier they will choose, let alone if they even change the display construction at all. If they do not change the display, the project stays with the competition. Adam remembers that it ruined his Christmas party when he heard at that time that this project had got into the hands of the competitor. A week later, however, he found out that it was only a rumor and that the project was still open. The reason why this takes so long is in Adam’s view the fact that there are too many different stakeholders interested and involved in the project since it is about a change in the customer’s standard display that lasts for many years. Adam explains:*

‘They don’t know what they want, there are two parties that want to advance things, the product developer and the marketing guys, the purchasing department just follows their decision. With regard to the construction, however, the product developer is not in line with marketing and if you manage to bring them together, then the production manager is against it.’

*Adam says that at the last meeting, the two marketing people involved only asked for a small change that is included in the new display sample that Adam brings along to the meeting. When we get to the meeting room, however, new people who - as Adam tells me afterwards - have not been involved before, join us. The product developer meets us and leads us to the meeting room, which slowly fills up with altogether six employees from different departments of customer Ri: production, assembly, product development, purchasing and marketing. The first discussion seems to be rather chaotic with everyone expressing his or her opinion. The production manager brings up an aspect that seems new to Adam. He proposes that the display should be made for automatic rather than for manual assembly, which requires a different construction and would therefore mean another sample design. After the marketing personnel agree with the display as it is and leave the room as well as the production manager and the person responsible for purchasing, only the product developer and*

*display packing specialist (assembly) stay to discuss the sample construction. Together they start a brainstorming session to find a means for changing the existing display to make it into one that can be automatically assembled and to discuss the implications of the new design for the assembly and packing of the display. During most of the meeting they go through the display, take it apart and engage in a highly technical discussion about the changes.*

*At the end of the meeting they not only agree to make certain changes in the display but also to meet together with a machine specialist from the SCAP side in the production in order to see how the different display constructions would work in the production and assembly. Back in the car Adam seems fairly happy despite the fact that there will be new changes to the sample:*

‘Most important is that we get an idea of what they need with regard to machines, and what they would cost. If they agree, we could think through the whole automatization idea. The advantage is that Tom [marketing] wants this display. I think that was awesome, I always thought that there was another supplier apart from us working on the display but now he just said at the meeting that ours is the only one. James [developer] is also positive, we just have to build on him now, this production manager I do not even know who he is.’

In the interaction between Adam and customer Ri, mentioned above, Adam presented the display but since the new design means that some processes in the assembly would change, the customer wants Adam to join them and run through the process together with their assembly personnel. Since the customer also wants to consider the option to make the display automatic, Adam proposes to bring along the SCAP machine expert to consider everything together. The customer wants to meet for the discussion of the new display in the production as soon as possible but has very few possible dates and Adam has planned a holiday in two weeks’ time. During the phone call with the SCAP machine expert, it becomes clear that Adam, even though he is not happy about it, would dedicate one day in the middle of his holiday to drive to customer Ri if that is the only date when the contacts from customer Ri and the machine expert can make it.

There are many things that come to mind when looking at this interaction and the salesperson’s comments. What seems extraordinary is the length of the unfinished project, almost one year, and what seems to be an imbalance in the investment of each side into this relationship. The Christmas episode suggests

that Adam experiences the loss of this project as very stressful. It appears that Adam feels that he has put a lot of effort into all the previous interactions and that the value of them for him stands and falls with the achievement of what seems to be his main goal, supply this design (rather than building up credibility or trust with the new customer). Adam seems to take a big *risk* in dedicating a lot of time and energy to serving the customer without getting anything in return, i.e. the project, so far ('two people from the design center', 'four weeks', 'we spent a lot of money'). While the customer has certainly also dedicated time to the meetings, they are also in the position to make the decision, which Adam highlights with his comment: '*... they just said "Yes that was right, but now things are different"*'.

The risk seems even greater against the background that Adam has just started working with this customer and the latter might therefore not feel the same commitment or obligation towards Adam than they might if it had been a long-term relationship. Surprisingly, however, when explaining the course of the project to me, he does not seem to complain or express frustration. It appears as if he was saying in a matter-of-fact way that '*they don't know what they want*'. His internal colleagues working with the customer seem to take a rather ironic approach possibly as a result of frustration or amusement. They place bets on the changes that they think the customer will want every time they see the display.

Another aspect that this story highlights is the *interpretive and contextual nature of value*. At the beginning of the project Adam has worked on solving the problem that he thought the customer Ri wants to sort out based on their previous interaction. However, since the customer's priorities seem to have changed in the meanwhile, the customer does not consider solving this problem as important anymore and the new display design is no longer appreciated. While it does look as if Adam has interpreted their problem description right at the beginning ('Yes that was right'), it seems to have changed during other interactions that the customer had in the meanwhile ('... but now things are different'). Hence, with a change in the situation, the customer has changed the own problem definition, influencing his or her interpretation of what is valuable. It is even more complicated in this specific case, where many stakeholders are involved, not only one customer. Whereas the marketing people might want to change the display in order to show a new profile to the customer, the production manager might be interested to change the display if it

accelerates the overall process, but the packaging specialist might only want a different display when it actually makes it easier for the staff to assemble. One could speculate that the formal power has shifted, or those that have the formal power have been influenced by other people involved. Hence, with different and shifting problem perceptions and interests through internal interactions, Adam's interpretation of the interests and goals that the different contacts seem to portray in one interaction is not likely to be valid for the ones in the next interaction.

Looking at this interaction with a sarcastic eye, it could be claimed that the customer seems to use Adam, more or less intentionally, as an external party to solve internal political disagreement. Adam drives to the customer to discuss the new sample for the display once the changes from the previous meeting have been implemented and considered in the display construction. He always meets with several customer contacts; at this meeting there were six people, and a few of them Adam has never met in any of the former sessions. At those meetings Adam is usually part of the internal discussions between the different stakeholders. Adam seems dedicated to get the new display project implemented and finalized, which he thinks the customer wants to have, since the customer initiated the project. While he seems realistic about the fact that he cannot satisfy everyone ('...we just have to build on him now, this production manager I do not even know who he is'), *he interprets some of his contacts to be satisfied with his work* ('Tom wants this display', 'he just said in the meeting that ours is the only one', 'James [developer] is also positive').

Just as with Christian's acts of managing the project internally at the customer, it is not obvious in this interaction whether Adam established this way of working by adapting his acts to what he interprets to be valued by the customer based on expectations expressed by the customer during the initial interactions, based on role taking or based on experience from work with other customers. Despite what seems objectively as lack of success, *Adam seems convinced that organizing and managing a design project for the customer, which he imagines the customer to want, is valuable.*

# Differentiating

‘A customer gets their bum wiped, they get the prices renewed, they get samples for free, they get cake for their birthday and their Christmas present. Everyone tries hard, but what every salesperson is lacking is time. So if you give salespeople the time to take care of the customer then you’ve already achieved a great deal.’  
(Adam)

I could interpret this quote as explaining in a nutshell why salespeople seem to dedicate their own spare time and energy, in a job that already requires more working hours than average in the week, to *‘take care of the customer’*. Adam’s statement suggests quite drastically, that much of customer care belongs to the usual job of selling, for example the obligatory birthday and Christmas gifts. One could assume that what he then refers to when talking about *‘taking care of the customer’* is everything beyond what a salesperson could do with his time to support the customer and make the customer’s working life easier. The statement could also be an indication of why the salesperson should do that other than create value for the customer. His statement of having achieved a *‘great deal’* with time and that *‘every salesperson is lacking time’* might be interpreted as using this time for the customer is a way to be different from most other people. Hence, the statement could be seen as a *way to differentiate for salespeople, to make themselves more or less indispensable and thus be in a better position to realize their own value*. That is important for the salesperson as it could balance the dependency relationship to the salesperson’s favor as already discussed in Chapter 7. The following story of Hans is used for a brief discussion on why the extra work that the salesperson often does for the customer should not only be interpreted as an attempt to create value for the customer.

## Story

*Hans speaks of a customer who was looking for a new presentation and packaging for the accessories of child car seats. The purchasing manager contacted him and Hans organized a workshop with them to get to understand their ideas, concerns and wants. After that, he visited stores in order to see how the products are currently packaged, how they are presented in the stores and how other competitor products are packaged. He said that he even interviewed different store managers about the brand and its products, what they think about it and how they would like them to be presented in their stores. He then sat together with the internal designers to come up*

*with a proposal and samples for the packaging of what he considers a better presentation, knowing the customer's concerns and those of the shopkeepers. In a presentation Hans tells the customer about the market research and their ideas on the packaging. He says that the customer was very impressed and totally convinced and gave them the project right away.*

Just as in the interactions above, this story could be interpreted as a salesperson's supporting act towards the customer by taking over work that they would otherwise have to do or could otherwise have done. However, this story could just as well be seen as a salesperson's attempt to think differently, to do more than expected and thus surprise and impress the customer. In the following, another interaction will be interpreted in greater depth where the salesperson not only does more than what he interprets the customer is asking for but even something different from what he thinks the customer wants in the attempt to be different.

### *Interaction*

*In the meeting with customer Tu, Edward brings a sample of a packaging that he created together with the designers based on the briefing that he got from a colleague of his usual contact person, Kai, who was on holiday. The design task was based on an existing packaging design produced by the competition with which the customer Tu is not satisfied anymore. Edward says that he found he could improve the use of the pallet and decrease the weight by slightly changing the design. He says that he wanted to optimize to save money for the customer because the industry is so price sensitive. In the following meeting with Kai it turns out that the extra boxes in the packaging that Edward wanted to reduce are necessary for the customer, for the internal handling processes. After Kai mentioned his new company car and a discussion on cars, Edward pulls out the sample that he brought along.*

Kai: 'Is that shelf height for [supermarket X]? Are there any standards we have to follow, do you know that? I am not that updated in that area anymore.'  
(*Measuring the packaging*)

Edward: 'I don't think so. But I'll check again.'

K: 'Isn't the lid a bit too thick?'

E: 'No, I think B-wave [corrugated material] is right, we could maybe drop a little bit in quality, but I would stick to B-wave because otherwise you will always have this buckle in front.'  
(Continues explaining the sample)

K: 'OK OK. Why is it so long here? Isn't that unnecessary?'

E: 'No, without it, it can move around too much.'

K: 'But we pack the products with their boxes into the packaging.'

E: 'No, this one's for use without the small boxes, so that the packaging can be smaller. That saves material and space on the pallet.'

K: 'Hmm, but that was not the point. In the handling they just pack the different boxes into the packaging.'

E: 'But then you really use the pallet poorly, it's now optimized.'

C: 'But they don't take the different boxes with the packaged content and throw them out again before they put them into the packaging. That would be stupid, too. It's a packaging for mixed products which they assemble at the handling desk.'

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

K: 'Yes, yes, we are still processing it.'

E: 'OK, I don't mind doing it the way you want. No actually, I don't like doing it because I don't think it makes sense, but I'll do it.'

K: 'Do you still have the sample of the initial construction? Then we do it like this, you just do that one as well. There are no big numbers for this design; these are all only toys right now but I want to have it done. Then I keep this here for now.'

E: 'I'm thinking if I have enough space here that I could design the small boxes into the outer box here with the optimized pallet size.'

K: 'That would be great. They should be 120 times 120, so you should have one-centimeter space, right?'

E: 'Yes, I'm also thinking that they will somehow fit in here, then I would redesign it slightly so that I save space. I'll look into it again. Then I would take it as it is but use the F-wave [corrugated material], a very thin one so I can keep the outer measurement because the use of the pallet is optimal like this.'

*Kai shifts to other projects that they need to discuss. They finish with another cup of coffee and the customer starts a discussion on soccer with Edward. Afterwards in the car, Edwards explains:*



‘Of course you could say, “If you say so, I’ll do it”, but that’s stupid, because we will probably have to do them again afterwards anyway (...) I always write down everything. But I don’t necessarily do it as the customer tells me but as I can imagine it. The customer can’t necessarily imagine it in the moment you meet him, but then afterwards when you present everything, he usually likes it.’

*Next time at the customer, Edward brings along the new design that he has changed as agreed and presents it; Kai seems very happy and takes the sample to proceed with the internal processes. Edward tells me afterwards that, he has to do something different every time, which is considered an improvement by the customer, otherwise he won’t make money on the packaging.*

I want to read this interaction once more with regard to the *contextual nature of value*. Even though an improvement in the form of cost saving is according to Edward, always important to Kai, it does not seem to be the case in this interaction. Instead it seems important for Kai that it stays as it is since it would otherwise signify too many changes in the handling that he would have to deal with. Usually an optimization of a packaging might symbolize value to Kai because he can present the savings internally which might prompt acknowledgement from his colleagues or boss. In this situation, however, Kai does not want to have to deal with any extra work or trouble and prefers to keep the existing packaging design even if it is not the optimal size for transportation. Hence, while Edward interprets cost savings to be valuable for the customer based on reactions from him during previous meetings, Kai considers it more valuable to avoid any extra work. It seems that Kai would have been happier to get the same packaging design again as soon as possible.

The first impression might be that Kai and Edward were misunderstanding each other because Edward got the information for a new packaging not from his usual contact but from his holiday stand-in. The second above-mentioned interpretation is that Edward’s impression of what is valuable for the customer is based on his experience from previous meetings in which he usually got positive reactions from the customer about cost saving optimizations. Looking, however, at the overall interaction and Edward’s comments about it, they suggest that Edward *has intended not to do what the customer asked*, that is to produce the packaging according to a sample they gave him. Edward does not think that the packaging is well designed, it is *‘waste of space and of material’* and against the supermarket regulations, so he considers it as *‘stupid’* to design something that

does not make sense in his view, even if the customer wants it ('But I don't necessarily do it as the customer tells me but as I can imagine it').

Edward's choice to ignore the customer's request could also be interpreted in his own interest, because he feels that he has to do something different than simply producing the standard sample in order to get a better price, which appears to be his aim to 'get out of' the interaction. From previous interactions he knows that saving the customer cost enables him to get a better price. This interaction, however, suggests, that the salesperson has a hard time to make a customer interaction valuable for himself if he does not first create value for the customer. Creating value by not optimizing and not saving costs seems to contradict the common-sense understanding of value creation. This interpretation demonstrates that for the individual customer contact value differs from that for other people in the customer company, for example managers, who might have considered the optimized packaging as valuable. But for Kai *it seems to symbolize trouble rather than improvement.*

Eventually Edward finds a possibility to stick to the old design in such a way that it does not mean a change in handling for Kai, which still optimizes the packaging for the best use of the pallet. So, one could speculate the interaction was in the end valuable for both, Kai and Edward. Kai might leave the meeting with the feeling of getting better packaging without entailing any extra effort to be spent on this new packaging design, and Edward might get a better price for it.

This interaction is interesting as it is different from the accounts in previous chapters where the salesperson usually does what the customer asks for or what he thinks they appreciate based on positive reactions displayed at earlier meetings or in role taking. In the present interaction the salesperson obviously ignores the signals from the customer ('I do not necessarily do as the customer tells me'). Hence, to sum up, *this interaction suggests that the salesperson tries to make the interaction with the customer valuable for himself by doing something different from what is asked for.* However, in this case, the value for the salesperson could only be realized once he made it valuable for the customer.



# Chapter Nine - Looking after Customer Relationships

‘The external salesperson can work like crazy but if the internal sales employee isn’t motivated and the designer doesn’t manage, it doesn’t work out. The salesperson can say we can build this display with six corners but if the designer doesn’t know how, the creativity of the salesperson doesn’t help.’ (Adam)

As this quote demonstrates, the salesperson does not work alone but is dependent on the own internal colleagues in doing his or her job. Hence, as mentioned before, in their attempt to create value for the customer and themselves, the salesperson not only interacts with the customer but also with internal colleagues who are related to different customer interactions. My interpretation of what the salespeople consider being valuable for the customer is, similar to the previous chapter, not based on their impressions of the customer’s acts. Instead, without the customer presence in the interactions, salespeople *imagine the value for the customer from the customer’s perspective* (role taking). What I interpret salespeople to consider valuable for the customer based on their acts and reactions at the internal meetings is that *the customer gets what he or she wants without any trouble*, which follows my argument in Chapter 6. In the attempt to make the salesperson’s internal interactions valuable, salespeople engage in *acts of preventative nature* to make sure that the customer interests are taken into account by the internal colleagues (‘promoting customer interests’, ‘making colleagues care’) and that there is no reason for the customer to be dissatisfied (‘preventing trouble’) or they have to face conflict and try to do *repair work* (‘protecting customer interests’).

The interactions also propose what makes them valuable for the salesperson beyond the satisfaction of the customer. The salespeople attempt to create value in the internal interactions for themselves, in form of *security* towards the customer and the own company, when they work on *securing the customer relationship*. They engage in internal discussions with the colleagues trying to

convince them, when they lobby for their customer's interests and shield them from trouble, and when they try to make their internal colleagues act in their customer's interest.

Just as with the communication between salesperson and customer, the exchange of information with internal colleagues does not always run without misunderstanding or conflict. In fact, considering the nature of interactions, which is a continuous circle of action and interpretation, people's comprehension will often be at variance with other's. As elaborated before, the salesperson needs to role-take in order to understand the customer's perspective and interests. This, however, presents one of the main challenges of internal interactions. While in customer interactions, salespeople seem willing to take the customer's interests into account and even prioritize them, since pursuing the customer's interests and goals is ultimately in the salesperson's interest, the situation in the internal interactions is different. The salesperson stands between customer and internal interests that usually differ, with the salesperson's interests being closer to those of the customer, the internal interactions seem more often to signify conflict of interests. When the salesperson attempts to create value for the customer it is often in line with creating value for himself, e.g. maintaining the customer relationship, but it is not always in line with what the internal colleagues consider valuable. This is also often referred to as customer or company orientation. Related to this, the challenge in the internal interactions for the salespeople is that they are dependent on the work of their internal colleagues, as the quote above illustrates, and they need to delegate work but the relationship between salespeople and internal colleagues is not formalized any differently than between other employees. This state that salespeople are responsible vis-à-vis the customer, implies that they need to delegate work to other colleagues but as they do not have any formal authority to manage them or hold them responsible for their work this often causes conflict.

## Guarding Customer Interests

The interactions in this section suggest that salespeople try to make sure that the customer gets treated well by their internal colleagues. What they consider good treatment of the customer differs between the interactions. But the salespeople's goals in these interactions seem to be to present what they consider to be the customer's interests. What the salespeople appear to regard valuable for the customer is, as suggested in Chapter 6, that they get what they want with a minimum of trouble.

### Promoting

Much of the salesperson's internal interactions are about trying to communicate to the internal colleague his or her interpretation of the customer's acts with regard to what they want and appreciate. With these acts, salespeople might, for example, act as a customer agent, lobbying for the customer's interests internally, or as a mediator that tries to give the internal colleagues the impression that the salesperson also takes their interests into account.

#### *Interaction one*

*Fred has had a meeting with a customer he has been in touch with for over three years without SCAP ever getting into the supply position, since they could not offer the desired volume and not at the right price. Fred remembers the first meeting to which he came very well prepared with a presentation and he was only sitting in the entrance hall when the purchaser came, gave him a sample and told him to make an offer. Some time after this situation SCAP got a request to tender on export articles, however also here SCAP was too expensive and did not get into a supply position. Recently, Fred got a call again and was asked to come by. For this specific meeting Fred has not made any preparations since he does not know what to expect, but he wants to get another chance to obtain the export and more specialized products from the customer. At the meeting, the customer wants to know why SCAP cannot supply their standard transport box at a better price. Fred explains that he tried but that he could not convince the plant to produce at the desired price. In the course of the interaction Fred tries to find out about other packaging that could fit better to SCAP's portfolio and therefore be produced at a more competitive price. The customer, however, wants SCAP especially to deliver the packaging with the bad*

*margin, because that is the one that they are in need of supply. In the following conversation, Fred tries to reassess the chances of making the packaging cheaper in production. Fred asks for the requirements, and possibilities where SCAP can optimize or change the packaging, and receives two product samples.*

*After a customer meeting, Fred decides that he wants to get a small meeting together on this project, with the plant manager, internal sales and the designer. Fred brings the two samples to this meeting and explains the background of the last two tenders that SCAP did not get and his impression of the new conditions for this tender, with the possibility to change the material and the punched holes in the samples. While the designer starts measuring the sample and asks Fred questions about the design, the internal sales colleague checks his old documents on this customer, asks for the name, the pallet type and the regularity and volume of delivery. Fred tells them that he knows that the price is poor but that the customer is willing to experiment with the packaging in case SCAP wants to try out different materials. Fred says that his idea was to use poorer quality and let some samples run through the customer's testing process. Fred asks if they could compare the two sorts of material in the calculation to find if there is any price difference at all, in order to see if it is worth the effort. The internal salesperson does not seem happy about the fact that he has to put a special sort into the system for the article as it requires more work for him. Fred says again that if the price is not better than the last one they will not even start the effort. The internal salesperson says that he will put the articles into the system in order to get a calculation but first he wants the visit report and the full name and address of the customer from Fred since he does not want to put it twice in case the address is another. The attitude of the internal salesperson towards Fred seems quite negative. When Fred mentions that after he has the calculation they should go together to the plant manager and see what he could do, the internal salesperson just answers that he should take care of it alone and asks when he needs the calculation. After Fred set the deadline he asks if they have any further ideas to optimize, he finalizes the meeting by saying again that using a similar price to tender does not make any sense.*

The first impression one gets from this interaction is that the internal colleagues do not seem particularly enthusiastic about working with this project. Fred's account indicates that none of the SCAP plants could offer a price for the supply that the customer considered acceptable. One could interpret an apparent lack of interest from the internal colleagues in this interaction in different ways. The internal colleagues might not consider the production of a packaging that is priced at a level that does not provide any margin as valuable. Fred, however,

wants them to find a way to save in the production of the packaging, so that they can meet the price. He seems to consider the delivery of a product, even though it might not provide any or hardly any margin, as interesting. One could speculate *why the interests seem to be different* here, the internal colleagues are not paid according to margin, so the fact that this product has a poor price might not be the main demotivation. However, when they have the plant profit perspective they might not consider this customer as valuable and therefore not be interested in putting any effort into this work. Another reason could be that the project is not particularly interesting for them because it does not require much creativity and it does not leave much room for new ideas for the designer. All that he can do is to change some flaps and holes or the material in the existing design. The internal salesperson might not be particularly interested because he might presume that such a price conscious customer could create more trouble for him throughout the subsequent interactions.

Another interpretation is a generally negative attitude of the internal salesperson towards Fred, whether it is personal or related to their working habits. But the internal sales colleagues do not appear to want to do anything more than necessary and only if Fred was also going to do his work properly, in this case in the form of the customer visiting report. External salespeople are supposed to write a report of every meeting in order to share information, delegate responsibilities or update the status of a project. Many salespeople issue the report by email in order to communicate the tasks to the internal colleagues but sometimes, as in this case, when they have a meeting about it, the salespeople consider it superfluous to write a report as well. In this interaction, however, it seems as if the internal colleague does not want to make it that easy for the customer to simply give him the information, he prefers to have everything prepared in a report. The comment from the internal salesperson who tells Fred that he has to engage in the price discussions with the plant manager without him, does not indicate supportive behavior between the colleagues. These parts of the conversation suggest that the relationship between the salesperson and the internal colleagues might not be unproblematic.

At the meeting Fred tells his colleagues what he found out in the meeting with the customer, that they can change the packaging, and he stresses several times that the customer is willing to do testing, if they want to change the packaging material. However, while he seems to be trying to tell them everything that he asked the customer about the packaging and the requirements, he does not



propose anything about how he thinks the packaging could be changed other than with a new material. His goal in this meeting seems to be to get his internal colleagues to understand the importance of finding a way to reduce the cost; he repeats this several times throughout the meeting. While he tries to *communicate the customer's interest and the information* that he got from the customer meeting, he does not grasp his role of helping to find a solution or trying to motivate the internal colleagues to take on this task.

Fred's acts suggest that he is attempting to present the customer's representative in the internal interaction. In the meeting with the customer he portrays himself to be on the customer's side, when he says that he tried to convince his internal colleagues to find a way to supply this customer. And internally, the salesperson makes the effort of trying to find a way to supply to this customer and fit the requirements seemingly because the customer tells him that they need another supplier. Another reason behind his efforts to present the customer's interests could also be the potential of supplying other packaging with a better margin once they are in the supply position with this customer. In the interaction with the customer he is told that he will only get to supply other packaging when they also supply the standard kind. Apparently in contrast to his internal colleagues he seems to see potential with this interaction to become valuable for himself.

#### *Interaction two*

*Edward says in the car on the way to the plant where he meets with the plant manager, designer, quality control and internal sales people, who work with one of his major customers, that they meet to discuss the customer's frequent claims. He explains that the customer has not addressed the problem yet but Edward rather wants to be proactive before the customer downgrades SCAP as supplier in the next evaluation. In the meeting, Edward asks a lot of questions that aim at understanding what the claims are about and what his internal colleagues think is the problem. One of the internal sales contacts talks about the customer's claim behavior that is creating a lot of extra work for them because they do not use the usual procedure. Edward asks the plant manager whether he thinks that the customer's claims are justified and why they happen so often. Together in the group they discuss how they can decrease the potential for future claims. Edward shares his experience with the customer and tries to explain to the internal colleagues how the customer thinks and what the trouble with the claims means for him or her. It seems as if the internal colleagues who were*

*previously rather passive at the meeting and rather unhappy with the customer got somewhat more proactive, apparently wanting to improve things. Edward thinks about a procedure whereby he wants to communicate with the customer and how the internal colleagues could address these issues with the customer demonstrating that SCAP cares about the customer. At the end of the meeting Edward mentions the amount of turnover that the plant makes with this customer, the plant manager agrees and seems quite happy about it.*

The outcome of interaction suggests that Edward is concerned that the customer might downgrade SCAP as supplier; this could mean for him that the customer relationship is at risk because they might lose volume or even at some point lose the customer. However, instead of meeting the internal colleagues and telling them that they might get downgraded if this continues, he asks them first what the problem is, what his colleagues think can be done about the claims and then tries to present the customer's perspective in the interaction. The difference between this interaction and the one with Fred is that Edward does not seem only to present the customer's interests in the internal interaction but demonstrates his interest in the views of his internal colleagues. He appears to take the latter's interests into account, or at least he gives the impression with his questions that he cares about them and wants to understand what their problem is with the customer. Hence, Edward attempts to stay neutral, playing the *role of mediator*, showing an understanding of his internal colleagues and encouraging them to try to understand the customer.

The customer's interest as Edward interprets and presents it at the meeting is to have less reason for making a complaint. The internal colleagues' interest seems to be to generate a better claim behavior from the customer, i.e. following the established guidelines and procedures, so that it does not create more work for them. They deal with this customer on a day-to-day basis and they seem unhappy about the work that the customer causes for them. It appears that they have developed a defiant attitude because they feel that the customer does not show respect towards them nor for their work. The salesperson's interest in this interaction does not seem to be in conflict or more directly related to neither the internal colleagues nor the customer. In his mediator role his main goal appears to be to *create a good atmosphere* in the relationship between the internal colleagues and the customer. He tries to re-establish the positive attitude of the internal colleagues towards the customer by explaining them the customer's perspective and the customer's interests.

Looking at how the interaction finishes, it seems as if Edward has succeeded in making his internal colleagues feel less negative about the customer than at the start. When closing the meeting, Edward mentions once more how much turnover the plant makes with this customer. This gesture could be read as showing the internal colleagues very bluntly how dependent they are on the customer or it could be to motivate them by telling them that they actually get something out of the trouble with the customer. To sum up, Edward's attempt in this interaction seems to be to *bring the customer's interests into the discussion with his internal colleagues, in order to do what he can to make the interactions between customer and supplier run more smoothly and for both parties*, the customer and the internal colleagues, to get what they want from this relationship.

## Protecting

In the following interactions the salesperson attempts to guard the customer's interests by protecting the customer from acts from the supplier company that the salesperson thinks will create negative reactions from the customer.

### *Interaction one*

*Jacob gets a phone call from the plant manager. First they talk about other organizational matters but towards the end the plant manager starts complaining about one of Jacob's customers, mentioning that it is no fun working with this customer anymore, and that he wants to write down how the situation has developed with this customer. Jacob is annoyed and explains to me afterwards:*

'They take this customer apart. Everything that he does is bad. I understand them at the plant, but when I get to hear these things, that they will calculate and write down what has happened with the customer then I get upset. Now it's about this invoice. (...) Because we from SCAP couldn't fix a truck in time, I talked with the customer since they have good contacts with some carriers. The carrier they managed to get was more expensive. Now I have this discussion internally about 115 Euro that the customer should pay - a customer that buys 3.7 million from us. Now they want me to talk to the customer about this invoice. The situation is pretty tense right now. I absolutely agree that we have bad prices with this customer because of competition, but I can't be angry with the customer and constantly think about how I can bother them. Then these people should come with me and sit in front of the customer and tell them about it face-to-face. But then, I am sure, they wouldn't be able to say a single word.'

What seems to be the main cause of conflict in the situation that Jacob talks about is the *conflict of interest*. While the salesperson's interest seems to be not to trouble the customer with something that in his view seems not to be worth the trouble, the internal colleagues consider it important that the customer pays the 115 Euro. The invoice for 115 Euro is an intriguing example in this story as it seems to be just a drop in the ocean considering both the size of the supplier and customer, yet this sum or invoice manages to cause such a conflict. The invoice seems to symbolize for the salesperson the internal orientation of his colleagues, or displeasure with the customer ('I agree that we have bad prices'). He presents the situation as if the internal colleagues only want the invoice to be paid because they want to *'bother'* the customer. Comparing the 115 Euro with the 3.7 million turnover that SCAP makes with the customer, he ridicules the colleague's insistence that the invoice is to be paid. But because the 115 Euro is a relatively small sum the symbolism is even stronger in suggesting the internal colleagues' desire or need for the return of their efforts or poetic justice.

The way the salesperson distinguishes or distances himself from his internal colleagues is intriguing. It does not appear as if his colleagues actually are colleagues working in the same company, presumably working for a similar goal. Instead he portrays himself to be on the customer's side, by referring to his colleagues as *'those in the plant'* or *'these people'*. The statement seems to express in a nutshell the familiar conflict between customer and internal orientation. Jacob, appears to depict two sides, one that *'take[s] the customer apart'* that considers the customer's acts as bad and *'constantly tries to bother'* the customer, and the other representing him who cares about the customer but also tries to *'understand'* or might sometimes *'agree'* with his colleagues. However, Jacob does not only portray his colleagues in this statement as a part with different interests that resent the customer but in his apparent anger he also describes them as cowards. He says that they always complain to him and ask him to deal with their complaints at the customer, but he thinks that they would *'not say a single word'* if they came face-to-face with the customer.

His statement let us assume that Jacob is not willing to take up this discussion with the customer because he seems to be ashamed if he had to ask them to pay the invoice for what he considers a ridiculously small amount. He would find it difficult to face the customer because then he would have to present the company's interests that he does not identify with. Another reason why he might not be willing to take up that discussion with the customer is because he

does not want to face trouble or get in conflict with the customer. While this might simply be because he does not feel like it or because he does not want to have the bother of it, a more likely explanation is that he *does not want to risk upsetting the customer*. The story suggests that the interactions with the internal colleagues are about keeping the customer satisfied.

### *Interaction two*

*Fred gets a phone call from Miriam, an internal sales employee. Miriam, who makes the price decisions together with her boss, the plant manager, and usually also the salesperson seems very annoyed, judging from her voice on the phone. She says that her boss does not allow her to accept an order at the price level that she has received from Fred's customer. Fred asks if she has already discussed it with the plant manager. She said that she had not because she first needs him to tell her what the plan is regarding the price increase, since it is a price index of 60 that only just covers the marginal cost.*

Fred: 'So tell him that we thought...'

Miriam: 'No, not thought. Horst [plant manager] will nail you down to every decision.'

F: 'Yes, tell him beginning of June we'll sit down together again.'

M: 'That's not enough, this means he will not make the order.'

F: 'Well, then he has to do that. I can't do anything about it.'

M: 'I know what makes him tick at present.'

F: 'Yes, me too and I'm sick of it.'

M: 'Do you think I'm not?'

F: 'Yes then he should reject the order. I can't do anything about it.'

M: 'OK, all right.'

F: 'But let me know before you talk to the customer what he said.'

M: 'Yes sure. Bye.'

*Later on the internal sales employee calls back again and tells him that Horst would only do it if the price increases by ten per cent. Fred asks to speak to him directly. On the phone with him, he argues that the price list they sent to the customer is valid up to the next price negotiation. Horst, however, wants new prices for this order now because of the increased paper price. The price index is in his view not acceptable*

*anymore. Fred says that he can visit the customer next week and negotiate new prices but that this order needs to have the old prices because otherwise they are not reliable. The plant manager mentions situations where he helped the customer out of problems with delivery and that he now wants the understanding from the customer when it comes to price. Fred argues that when there is a price reduction, SCAP does not instantly decrease the price for the customer, they also take the benefit from that margin, now they have to deal with the opposite situation in the same way. At the end of the conversation, they agree on the old price for the current order and that for next week new prices are to be negotiated. After he hangs up Fred says: 'Jeehaa, I think this is the first time that I got him to agree with me, the last times the discussions ended in his favor.'*

*Fred mentions that he used always to be lucky because he got along well with the former plant manager; he knew exactly which buttons to push. With Horst, however, he has more trouble:*

*'I always have to think about how I could push this through but I have not found the right way yet. It is a little bit like it was with parents; I knew exactly what to tell my dad so that I got what I wanted. That is the same in the company.'*

The conflict that appears in these two interactions and the salesperson's commentary is similar to the one above, in that it is a *conflict of interests*, with the salesperson watching over the customer's interests and the internal colleagues seeing to those of the company. In the first interaction it seems as if the internal sales colleague is somewhat stuck in between those interests; she has the plant manager who is her boss telling her what she should do but she also seems to be tired of *'what makes him tick'* ('Do you think I'm not?'). What they seem to refer to by what makes the plant manager *'tick'* is that he has a much stronger price focus ('nail you down to every decision', 'that is not enough, this means he will not make the order'). Hence, while the internal salesperson appears tired and unhappy to have to discuss prices with Fred, she seems to do so in a rather determined fashion ('no, not though'). Fred's reaction appears defiant ('Well, then he has to do that'). A couple of times he tries to demonstrate to the internal colleagues that he cannot do what she or Horst want him to do ('I can't do anything about it.'). He makes no attempt to justify why he cannot do it. He portrays himself as not being in a position of choice.

In the interaction with Horst, the reason for the conflict seems to be equally absurd as the invoice of the 115 Euro in the example above. The general

discussion about pricing is a prominent topic of conflict between customer, salesperson and internal colleagues. In this interaction the conflict revolves around the immediacy of the price increase for an order that the customer has placed based on the former price list. Horst seems to be stressed about the price squeeze that he has to manage with raw material prices coming in. And a *better price in this situation means for him a better margin on the sale and one step in the direction of a better profitability for the plant*. In the conflict with Fred he refers to the support that he gave to the customer and points out the necessity for the customer to give something in return for a fair relationship. He depicts himself as victim in the situation where he is in trouble and wants help or understanding from the customer.

Fred in return uses the *fairness argument for the customer's advantage*. He does not consider it as being fair to the customer to change the prices for an order that has been made in accordance with a valid price list. He also demonstrates that in a relationship, fairness has to be reciprocal. This means in his view that since the plant manager does not instantly decrease the prices for the customer once the raw material prices decrease, he cannot do the opposite. Moreover, one could also read this interaction in terms of the missing formal hierarchy between salespeople and internal colleagues. The comment from Fred, *Jeeha, I think this is the first time,..*; gives the impression that it is as much about winning the argument in the internal power struggle as it is about the actual outcome.

Fred's concern in this discussion looks as though Horst might simply increase the price for the current order. One reason for this concern could be that the customer would face a sudden price increase, thus creating trouble. But a main thought behind Fred's defense of the customer seems to be *his assumption that the customer will perceive the sudden price increase as unjust and perceive the supplier and hence Fred as unreliable. The obvious fear is the damage that this might do to the relationship and the trouble that Fred would have to face*, having to make up for it throughout subsequent interactions. Even though it could also be important for the plant manager to keep the customer relationship, it seems that Horst would rather risk losing a less profitable customer relationship than keeping it. For the plant manager it might not matter to lose this customer and substitute it with another. For the salesperson however losing a customer relationship could signify a decrease in commission and most certainly more work to acquire a new customer to fill the gap.

## Making Colleagues Care

In the above interactions most salespeople take on the role of the customer's representative while they see the internal colleagues as the agents for the plant or the own company. Facing and dealing with this conflict of interests when trying to convince the internal colleagues to keep the customer in mind in their acts, appears to be a major challenge in the internal interactions. While the former section shows the struggles and fights or discussions that the salespeople have with their internal colleagues, the salesperson's acts discussed in this chapter seem to be about preventing these conflicts or misunderstandings. Salespeople attempt to build personal relationships and motivate their colleagues to make them care about the customer or at least about the salesperson, as they assume their work of creating value for the customer becomes easier when the colleagues are willing to help. Working on the customer orientation of the internal colleagues *could be interpreted as attempts to make the interactions valuable for the customer by providing the access to what they want and making sure that they are taken care of by the internal colleagues as well.*

### Creating personal relationships

'You have to sell internally, there are enough people from whom you want something, and if you get along with them, then many things are easier. If you get along with the designer, then you might have the sample on the next day and not just in 2-3 days.' (Marcus)

Interesting with Marcus' remark is the equalization of internal interactions with customer interactions by using the term 'selling'. However, what this selling entails does not become clear in this statement. In relation to the 'people from whom you want something', it indicates the notions of convincing and influencing behind the act of selling. The statement suggests that Marcus considers 'getting along' with people an important condition to conduct selling, hence to be on good terms personally with the colleagues, which could be called a good personal relationship.

The reason he puts forward for the necessity to sell internally or to get along could be explained by the dependency that the salesperson has on his or her internal colleagues mentioned in the introduction to this chapter ('enough



people from whom you want something'). At the same time it seems to highlight once again the lack of a formal hierarchy, as he says that the salesperson '*wants*' something from the internal colleagues but in order to get it, they need to get along. Hence, his statement suggests that if the internal colleagues do not want to help the salesperson they won't do so or at least not as well as they could ('just in 2-3 days'). In that sense, I want to interpret the statement above to suggest that the work with internal colleagues is *based on liking and favors*.

An important difference between the salesperson's dependency on the customer's cooperation and the one on the internal colleagues seems to be that the customer cooperates because he or she assumes to get something out of it. If that is not the case, the customer would consider it a useless or invaluable interaction. In the internal interactions it seems to be different since for the internal colleagues the interactions with the salesperson are part of their work. They and the salesperson might be equally interested in satisfying the customer or in trying to get a good margin but, for example, their reward or recognition whether from managers or customer is not as directly linked to the customer's positive reaction. Hence, it seems more obscure as to what makes an interaction with a salesperson more or less valuable for them and this is not the focus in this work either. However, one can assume that if there is nothing that the internal colleague gets in return for his or her efforts, *it is likely to be considered by them as a favor or a service to a friend or nice colleague*.

The following interaction and salesperson comments suggest that what the colleagues might consider as valuable is some form of appreciation from the salesperson for their work.

*Jacob calls an internal sales colleague and asks her for a favor. He needs a price approximation for a different material in a packaging within the following couple of hours in order to give the customer that he is about to visit another option. From her reaction and tone of her voice she seems unhappy about this request. She says that she will try but cannot promise to get it done in time. Afterwards Jacob explains to me that she was in a bad mood, but he knows this colleague and he says that he too is not always in a good mood. He says that to a certain degree he plays that game with her but if she gets too moody he can also get angry with her and they argue: 'I don't like it but she seems to need it'. He says that he needs the information at short notice because the customer visit came about at equally short notice. He says that if he had*

*told her what she should do, that she only needed to make a dummy in the calculation, it would prolong the discussion on the phone. He knows as he puts it, his 'horses in the stud'. Further he explains that for him the personal relationship internally is just as important as the one with the customer because the salesperson needs to sell not only externally but also internally. He says that when he is in one plant he usually gives everyone the hand, because he knows he could have any one of these people on the phone one day when he needs something. Jacob says that they talk about salesperson behaviors because he heard on some occasion that they did not appreciate it when the salespeople did not even bother to say hello.*

Jacob uses the term personal relationship that he considers as a necessity to sell internally, though what internal selling entails for him is not particularly clear. However, against the background of the interactions from the previous section I could consider internal selling as the salesperson's acts in an attempt to convince the internal colleagues to take care of the customer's interests. With that interpretation the salesperson has the role of matchmaker, convincing the customer of the supplier company as a partner, and vice versa. What a good relationship signifies for him becomes clearer when he tries to explain what he does to keep up this personal relationship, i.e. shakes everyone's hand.

Jacob underlines that he considers it important to know his internal colleagues personally ('I know my horses in the stud'). With the interaction under review, Jacob says that he is aware of his colleague's moods and this seems to enable him to adapt his lines of action to her; he plays along with her games as he puts it ('I do not like it but she seems to need it'). Hence, knowing the internal colleague here means knowing patterns in her actions and reactions from past meetings enabling him to interpret her acts but also to know how to behave in order to influence certain interpretations and acts of this colleague. This *seems to be valuable for Jacob because it makes his work easier*, for example he says he saves time by avoiding lengthy discussions with his colleague on the phone.

Also Jacob's statements illustrate his state of dependence, since he could have anyone on the phone when he needs help of some sort. The comment suggests that for this reason he is strategic about giving his colleagues the right signals and gestures as a sign of his amiability. He assumes that they consider the gesture of shaking hands as important and thus tries to do so to generate positive reactions from his colleagues. He interprets their reaction to shaking or not shaking hands with the suggestion that they see it as a symbol of respect and

appreciation, because they seem to take umbrage when a salesperson does not bother. Hence, Jacob is concerned with creating the right image with his internal colleagues as a person who is not too arrogant or busy to not *appreciate and recognize his internal colleagues and hence eventually acknowledging his dependency on them.*

## **Emotional involvement**

While salespeople try to create a positive working atmosphere with their internal colleagues by bringing about a positive attitude towards them, as discussed in the above interactions, they could seem to be trying to influence their positive attitude towards work in general. In some of the following stories, the salespeople seem to portray their own role as a manager as they aim to motivate the internal colleagues either by involving them or giving positive feedback.

### *Interaction*

‘What we do with all the systems and reports is very risky, ... I will continue driving to the plant and talk to the people, because if everything gets automated and communicated via written documents just so we have more time to write even more documents, then a lot of the motivation will get lost.’

One interpretation of Adam’s statement is an expression of concern that all the different software tools and attempts to formalize the internal communication threaten the personal contact between internal employees and salespeople as well as customers. The emphasis in this statement does not seem to be on the quality of the contact, as I have interpreted the comments in the previous section as being about a good personal relationship or getting along. Adam speaks of face-to-face meetings (‘driving to the plant’) and talking to the people. He seems to contrast the personal conversation between two people with the electronic conversation between them. In his view, the personal touch is what motivates the internal colleagues. Some of the comments that he makes about interactions with internal colleagues could be interpreted as an explanation of what he considers to be motivating about personal contact.

*Adam gets a call from the designer on the way back from the customer meeting, asking how it went. Afterwards Adam tells me that he really appreciates care shown by the designer. He said that previously he used to call the designer every time on the*

*way back from the customer to tell him how it went. He remembers that the designer was not used to this in the beginning but now he says that he calls on his own initiative:*

‘He wants to know how it went, and he feels like calling and asking, that is important. I also take him with me from time to time, if he wants to present his display’.

*In another situation Adam gets the information from a SCAP marketing employee that he can use soft toy elks as a give-away for a specific customer event he is planning. Before he gives the OK, he asks the internal sales colleague if she thinks that he should do this. He says afterwards: ‘If you involve them, they feel good.’*

While his statement *‘if you involve them, they feel good’* somehow seems too easy and paints a too simple picture of the internal colleagues, it seems to express what he interprets his colleagues to appreciate. This situation with the soft toys is intriguing as it seems to be a trivial matter to decide which presents to give to the customers at an event, yet he asks his internal sales colleague for her opinion. What he appears to define as involvement in this situation is the gesture of asking for her opinion. By asking he shows her that her opinion matters and that she is important in his main intention of making the interactions and the relationship valuable for the customer. *In this interaction it almost seems as if the act of asking the colleague for her opinion is just as much about showing the gesture of asking as about actually getting an opinion.* This definition of involvement is what he considers to make the internal colleagues feel happy, presumably because they feel needed and important.

When he talks about the interaction with the designer, it seems that it used to be his initiative to seek the communication with the designer every time after the customer visit, but now the designer is proactive. This statement suggests some divergence from Adam’s definition of involvement in asking for an opinion. In this interaction with the designers it seems rather about giving feedback, updating colleagues on the situation (‘how it went’) or even taking them along so they can get feedback straight from the customer. The interaction and comment proposes that the meaning of involvement here *is the participation in the interaction with the customer or at least the experience of the customer’s reactions in the interaction filtered through the salesperson’s perspective.* Referring back to Adam’s concern that this gets lost in electronic exchange and forms, one could imagine that what is important in this exchange is less of informative than of

*emotional character.* Feedback could be formulated in an email, but what Adam seems to consider important is to also communicate the emotions that accompany disappointment, enthusiasm, despair, etc.

One could imagine many reasons why the interaction of the internal colleagues with the customer could be valuable for the salesperson or at least the salesperson's attempt to try to play back the interaction with the customer to the colleagues. The most obvious one would be the notion that the internal colleagues, whose work the salesperson is dependent on, get to know how the customer acts and reacts throughout the interactions and might learn to act and influence the customer to produce positive reactions. However, what seems to be Adam's main concern here is that his colleague *'wants to know how it went, and he feels like calling and asking'*, hence something that one could call *emotional involvement or commitment of the colleagues* that he tries to encourage. Adam's comment about the lost motivation without personal contact suggests that it is this personal, emotional exchange that Adam considers to be the motivator for the internal colleagues. Hence, the interpretations suggest that Adam considers the emotional involvement to motivate the colleagues and *make them happy.*

It is difficult to argue at this point whether the designer simply got used to getting updated and is now so accustomed to it that he is curious and is actively seeking the contact or whether he always appreciated it. However, the point here is not to argue whether the salesperson's acts actually make the colleagues want to feel involved or not but it is about discussing what the salespeople do when they think to involve the colleagues and why.

### *Story*

*Karl says that he calls the internal sales contact at least once a day to hear if there is any news and to update her about customers. He also tries to talk a lot with the designers because he knows that he can learn from them. And he tries to discuss issues directly with his colleagues in production, to find out what is possible and what not, and why. He thinks that the internal contact is so important because in his view the relationship between production and sales is often difficult. He says that they bear a grudge against salespeople that they drive around in expensive cars and earn a lot of money just by sitting in the car.*

‘The production is rather plant oriented so it is important to involve them, take them to the customers so they see which problems the customers have. Several times already, I took the people from the machines along to the customers to show them how they pack their product, what the process looks like and what the problems are. If you involve them, then they also see it as their baby and are not so resistant to new things. They see it with different eyes.’

Interpreting Karl’s statement, we could partially refer back to the discussion of Adam’s interactions. The obvious understanding of involvement that Karl seems to have is the physical *‘taking along’* the colleague to the meeting with the customer. However, by using the symbol of *‘seeing it as their baby’*, he suggests that this physical involvement encourages an *emotional involvement* as well. Karl suggests that reducing the distance between the internal colleagues and the customer helps the colleagues to understand the customer’s situation and this understanding seems to be important to make the colleagues feel committed and involved in the work for the customer. His commentary indicates that he believes that putting the internal colleagues into the position of the salesperson would also make them more customer-oriented (‘they see it with different eyes’). While the physical distance seems to be one interpretation, another could also be that the salesperson believes them to understand the work of the salesperson better, that it is about more than sitting in a car.

Hence, we could argue that the salesperson might try to encourage the internal colleagues to take the salesperson’s role by making them part of the interactions and putting them into the context. One could assume that making the internal colleagues understand the salesperson’s work improves the difficult relationship that Karl talks about. His comment indicates that this involvement of the internal colleagues might make the salesperson’s work easier as *‘they are less resistant to new things’*. Hence, if the salesperson were to make a change or come up with a new solution that they consider valuable for the customer, they are less likely to run into problems with the colleagues because they will understand the reasoning behind it and realize the value it creates for the customer.

Based on the interpretation of this section, I suggest two aspects that seem to be valuable for the salesperson: a cooperative working relationship that is based on understanding, and the effort to take each other’s perspectives and interests into account. Ultimately, this relationship does not only seem to make the *salesperson’s work easier but presumably also improves the work of the internal colleagues* according the salespeople. Hence, if we assume the salesperson to value

a satisfied customer, as we suggested in Chapter 6, the physical involvement does not only seem to encourage the internal colleagues' understanding of the customer but also the commitment to the make the customer happy.

## Preventing Trouble

It is in the nature of interaction that the intent of one person and the interpretation of the other are at variance. For the salesperson trying to bridge boundaries between customer and company it often leads to conflict and disappointment as usual day-to-day components of their job. It is usually the salesperson who is held responsible by the customer if anything goes wrong even if it is due to internal miscommunication. In their attempts to prevent any reason for customer disappointment salespeople seem to try to minimize the risk of miscommunication, for example by specifying what they think the customer wants in a concrete design idea or by controlling the colleague's acts as much as the job allows.

### Specifying customer insights

*Boris tells a story about an incident with a design colleague. After a customer visit he remembers that he drove to the plant and sat together with the responsible designer and the design manager after a display briefing with a customer. He says that he told them several times that a round display is an absolute no-go for the customer. But when he drove by the next time, the designer had started with the sample and got stuck with round trays. Hence, the final result of the sample did not fulfill the requirements the purchasing manager of customer Un had explicitly mentioned to Boris. He said that he was disappointed that all his efforts were in vain. But he knows if he now criticizes them, they will never be motivated again,*

'I can't sit on her lap all the time to tell her what to do (...) Now, I can't say "You screwed it up, it's written in the briefing, no round trays, and what do you do, round trays!'. How should you deal with these people?

One could imagine several reasons for why the internal sales contact did not follow the advice of the salesperson that seems to be so explicit in the salesperson's story. Firstly, the salesperson may not have made it as explicit as he

says he did. Another reason could be that the internal contact was too busy and overworked that she simply did not listen or remember what Boris has told her. What is perhaps more unlikely is that she ignored his information on purpose. Judging from his statement, Boris is upset about the lack of possibilities for action. He distances himself from his colleagues by using the words *'these people'*. One could interpret this anger to be grounded in Boris' perceived lack of power or possibilities for action ('I can't', 'I can't', 'How should you'). With the image of sitting on someone's lap he seems to describe a situation of close supervision, which he considers being impossible. But he also feels that he cannot give honest feedback to the colleagues because he fears that it would damage their working relationship in future. This quote could be seen as to describe the dilemma that salespeople face, being responsible for a colleague's acts in front of the customer but not able to take on a role as manager in the interaction that supervises, gives feedback, rewards or 'punishes'.

The main point that I want to make here is that these stories of conflict and disappointment in the salesperson's work are no exception. This encourages them to find ways to minimize the risk of misunderstanding in the interactions with the internal colleagues. In the attempt to make the customer interaction valuable, the salespeople often try to delegate as little as possible, or at least minimize the potential of miscommunication in the delegation. One of these strategies seems to be to in advance do much of the *initial idea work*, in order to have a more concrete design idea or solution that is easier to communicate.

'They are too busy and have too little time, if you already have a first idea or an approach they are happy, then they only need to modify it. If you only forward the briefing, it would definitely go in the wrong direction.'

With the image in mind that the work of the designer is creative and hence that the designer might like to have freedom in his or her work, one could think that the designers would prefer to be less restricted since exact guidelines renders their work more operational. For Boris, however, they are happy about the operational nature of their job, where they only have to *'modify'* the design idea or *'bring it into the right direction'*. The reason why he considers this to be a better strategy, causing less misunderstanding, is the designer's time pressure and the workload that they have to cope with, which assumedly leaves little time to produce original ideas. One could imagine that the lack of time means that they cannot be sufficiently dedicated in his view to put more effort into doing a good job or that they are so stressed with work that they do not manage to listen and



remember the details of the conversation with the salespeople. Hence, *by having a concrete idea about a design solution, Boris does not only consider making the internal colleagues happy but also wants to specify the design ideas that he considers to be appreciated by the customer.*

*David explains that when he meets the designers, he usually has an idea of what the solution should be. He thinks that the worst thing is to just throw down a design brief in front of the designer because then no project would advance in the desired direction. Once after the meeting with the customer, where the customer showed him the display that he wanted to also use for another product, David already thought of some ideas how the existing display could potentially be changed. He meets the designer and tells them about it. He also tells them about his idea, but the designer is not very happy about it. David tells him that he will take time at home to think it through and formulate it before he gets back to the designer again.*

‘Often I don’t have the idea the moment I leave the customer, but then I sit at home, I need to have a clear idea of what I want. If I don’t know that before I forward it to the plant, the outcome will not be successful.’

Another impression one might get from the quotes is that the reason the salespeople prefer to have the idea or solution ready before they ask their internal colleagues is that they are in a better position to find a solution or design that the customer is happy with. Most of these meetings are with customers that the salesperson has been working with over several years. Therefore, the salesperson might feel the confidence to know or at least be better aware of how to create value for the customer than colleagues who have not been in touch with the customer or at the customer plant so often. The salesperson has learned about the customer’s actions and reactions during their many meetings and has gained experience from previous projects. Since it is usually the salesperson who has the direct contact throughout different projects and therefore not only gets the first briefing from the customer but also the reactions throughout different stages of the project. While the designers are expert on technical constructions, the salespeople often feel to be in a better position to find the solution for the customer because of this tacit knowledge gained from interacting with the customer, customer proximity, or gut feeling for what might be right or wrong. Hence, specifying the idea further, in the form of a thought through idea, *is considered one strategy to achieve a more successful outcome, which means it is in line with what the salesperson imagines the customer to want.*

## Control is better

Close supervision of the internal colleagues is difficult, given the nature of the sales work where the salesperson is geographically separated from the other colleagues. The following interactions I interpret as acts of salespeople in trying to make sure that the work for and with the customer is done as they think is expected or appreciated by the customer, by controlling the activities of the internal colleagues as much as possible.

### *Interaction one*

*David has a conversation with a packaging designer from SCAP on the phone. He speaks about one of the current packaging ordered by his customer. He starts asking about the printing grid<sup>6</sup> that is planned to be used for the packaging. He seems surprised to hear from his colleague, which one they were planning to use for it. He asks whether the printing grid is not too rough for the quality that the customer usually gets their packaging printed. The designer tells David that this was recommended and agreed with the SCAP printing experts. David tells his colleague that he will get clarification about this. He calls the repro company, a third party, which works with the color combinations for SCAP. When David asks him about the assigned printing grid for this packaging, he replies that he was a bit surprised himself about the quality for this project, but the SCAP printing expert has decided on it. In the conversation David discusses further material possibilities and asks the repro person for his opinion on the grids. He tells him that even though he did not think so at first, the outcome of the first print looks OK in his opinion. David asks him when the SCAP printing expert who made the decision is back, joking about the fact that he already has to ask the external printing agency when his own colleagues will be back, and tells him that he wants to talk to him before he accepts the print.*

In the situation described above the customer has not been involved, has not asked for better quality or complained about anything. However, David seems to intend to prevent any potential negative reaction from the customer as he thinks to know the customer's reactions from former interactions. These interactions give the impression that David sees himself as knowing best what the customer wants and expects in terms of printing quality. He seems concerned that the internal printing expert has made a decision that might lead

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<sup>6</sup> The printing grid is used to apply the colors to the paper, usually before it is cut out in the right packaging format.

to a customer that is not satisfied with the printing on the packaging. An obvious reason seems to be that he feels that this might rebound negatively on him and influence the customer's impression of his work. Hence, David is making a prior check, as a preventative measure, to see whether things are being done in a way that he thinks they should.

His intentions with the phone-check could be twofold: he appears to want to influence his colleagues' impression that he is after them that they cannot and should not make any decisions that are not in the customer's interest, i.e. saving on quality. Another goal might be to assure himself the print is done properly so he does not have to worry about dealing with an upset customer. By calling his contact at the printing company it appears that he wants to talk to someone that he trusts and hear his opinion. His distrust or suspicion towards his internal colleagues might derive from the feeling that they have conflicting interests with those of the customer, for example cost saving. His contact at the printing agency does not play the expert role for David in this interaction and he expects him to be somewhat neutral because his interests are not affected by whether they choose a better or worse quality. Even though his contact assures him that the quality is OK, he wants to talk to the printing expert who made the decision before anything is started. It appears that he wants to hear the printing expert's reasoning for why he or she has chosen this grid and potentially challenge him on this decision if he feels that it is not in the customer's interest.

I have interpreted these salesperson acts of calling those who are responsible for these decisions, questioning them, and getting external expert opinions to be better informed when taking the internal discussions as controlling acts. Not only does he *send a signal to the colleagues that he is checking on their work, but he even seeks an external expert opinion that he seems to trust more, in order to compare and hence verify the decision of his internal colleagues*. Based on these interactions, it can be argued that the salesperson defines some of the internal interactions, those discussed in this section, as preventive actions taken in the customer's best interest but also in the own best interest. I will elaborate this notion further with the help of a similar event.

### *Interaction two*

*After the visit at customer Né where Elisabeth was unhappy about the misunderstanding that has caused her more work, David calls the responsible internal salesperson he cannot reach at that moment. There was a packaging that was meant to be changed from being assembled automatically to now being assembled at a co-packer manually. SCA Packaging did samples for this packaging and the internal sales at that plant were to calculate it. The manager from customer Né co-packer wanted a meeting with this internal sales person. David asked him to write a report so that everyone involved would be up-dated on what has been talked about in this meeting. Elisabeth needed the drawings for the packaging and David sent them to her but now these drawings were wrong because the internal sales person and the co-packer manager decided on something else. This confusion caused Elisabeth more work. He is unhappy because he said that he made clear that he wants to be informed about everything to avoid getting into this kind of dilemmas:*

'I go nuts when these things happen. Internal sales and design can expect from me that I do a proper preparation, no problem. But in return, I expect that I get informed about everything. There shouldn't be a single tender without copying to me.'

*He continues later on about his work with his internal colleagues:*

'I still sometimes do a random check in the evenings and calculate, because I am afraid that internal sales did not have a good day. Otherwise I want them to know that I have a folder where I can check any time what they send out.'

Even though this last statement is not directly related to the context of the one before, it could be interpreted to be about salesperson's activities entailing the assumption of creating value for the customer by trying to keep the interaction as trouble free as possible. Judging from the meeting with Elisabeth, one could assume that she did not appreciate the extra work because of this internal misunderstanding. David's reaction indicates that he is not surprised about the reaction from Elisabeth because he knows how she feels about events that create extra work for her. It appears to be the reason why David seems to expect of his internal colleagues to be informed and involved in everything.

One interpretation could be that David simply does not trust his internal colleagues to do a good job. David's comment that his colleagues might not have '*a good day*' leads to speculation whether he assumes that the internal colleagues might not be able or willing to do everything right for the customer.

But his comment, *I want them to know that I have a folder where I can check*, appears like a thread in this particular context that creates the impression of mistrust. It might suggest that he believes they try to make mistakes on purpose to damage him and his customer relationship. One could, however, also interpret his intention as an encouragement for the internal colleagues to do a good job. These interpretations support once again, that *the controlling acts of the salesperson not only serve to get the own assurance that the internal work is done in the customer's best interest, but also has a signaling function towards the internal colleagues that encourages them to act in the customer's best interest* or do a good job according to the salesperson.

Reading these statements one gets the impression that David feels the pressure to do everything right for the customer and at the same time he holds the belief that he is the only one in the position to do this. Besides the frustration that his colleagues do not do what he tells them to ('I go nuts'), he also seems to be disappointed that they do not do what he wants even though he considers he is doing everything to make the work easier for them ('proper preparation'). A good working relationship with his internal colleagues for him seems to involve much work on his part to facilitate their job but in exchange he asks them to involve him in everything, which gives him a feeling of control.

Besides the fact that the salesperson feels the customer interactions to be more valuable for the latter, trouble-free and always protecting the customer's interests, the salesperson also seems to consider his work to be more successful when he keeps an eye on most things that are going on at the customer. The controlling acts seem to render the salesperson less uncertain about getting a positive reaction from the customer since they consider themselves most willing and capable of creating value for the customer.

## Securing Customer Relationships

From the interactions discussed in this chapter I have interpreted that the salesperson's attempts to create value for the customer in the internal interactions are twofold: to pave the way for them to get what they want (according to the salesperson), and to keep away any potential trouble that could ruin the customer's interaction experience. Some of these acts are of a more preventive nature, some more of repair work. From the salesperson's perspective these interactions seem valuable *when they assure salespeople that the customer will be satisfied and that the customer relationship will run smoothly*. There seem to be several reasons for imagining why the customer relationship is valuable for the salesperson.

'Once you are in a supply position, you can visit the customer more often. There are very few that would allow you to walk through the production and look at the processes otherwise. Once you are supplying, you send the packaging, you come by and ask how everything is going. If there is something new, then you have the chance to prove yourself.' (Nils)

One could interpret Nils' formulation of '*proving*' oneself in several ways. However, most likely he refers to the proving vis-à-vis the customer. Proving in this context could mean convincing the customer contact of the own person as partner. The proving could refer to many aspects, for example, the salesperson's credibility or ability to create value for the customer. Hence, for the customer to think that the salesperson is capable of making the interactions valuable for him- or herself, they might, for example, have to create their first design or give the customer the feeling that they have helped or solved a problem for them. Another aspect that the salesperson could prove is the own willingness to create value for the customer.

One reason why an existing customer relationship seems to be valuable for the salesperson is the physical access to the customer plant ('walk through the production'). This *physical access* I could argue to be valuable for the salesperson as it enables him or her to understand the production processes and hence might give them the opportunity to influence the customer's problem perception about the own situation. Besides access to the plant however, Nils seems to suggest the importance of personal contact ('ask how everything is going'), in order to find out how to create value ('prove yourself').

This comment shows the dependency of the salesperson on the customer, in that if the latter does not want to cooperate by, for example, letting the salesperson come by at the plant or even meeting or talking to the salesperson at all, the salesperson cannot prove him or herself if the customer does not want to interact. Hence, judging from the comment the salesperson is in a catch-22 situation when they need an existing relationship in order to create value for the customer, *because they need to interpret what the customer might value and that is dependent not only on the interaction with them but also on having knowledge of the customer's situation*. However, a relationship, or at least a continuation of an interaction only comes about when the individuals consider the present interaction as valuable. This dilemma explains why an existing customer relationship is so important for the salespeople.

### *Story one*

*Boris talks about one of his customers, a major global consumer brand company. He seems desperate and frustrated with the fact that he has no idea what is going on in their decision processes and that he does not feel that he knows what they want because he has no contacts in the company other than the purchasing manager. He already figured out that if he only gets an email with a 'thank you' and a rejection, the display sample has not been among the best three. If he gets invited to talk about the samples and to see the other ones (that got chosen first), then his display is one of the best three.*

'I haven't got a have a chance if I don't know what makes them tick, if they play Chinese whispers internally. There is a product manager somewhere who says what he or she wants but it goes through several hands before it gets to me. (...) It is really important to have this personal contact and to know a lot about the customer...'

Boris' statement seems to express a helplessness or even desperation that he feels about his situation with the customer ('I won't have a chance'). The reason, this statement suggests, is that he does not understand the customer's internal decision making, who the ones with the informal power are and what they think or want ('I don't know what makes them tick'). He seems to have made sense of some of the customer's reactions during previous meetings, speculating in retrospective over what must have happened for the customer to react as they do. The metaphor of '*Chinese whispers*' illustrates in the context of this statement the insecurity that Boris is facing in his dealings with this customer. It seems to describe the customer's way of working as secret and elusive, excluding the

supplier, or Boris in particular, from the internal communication. The problem here for Boris seems to be that he knows there is someone whose opinion is important in the company but he does not have any contact with this person and everything that gets to him has been filtered by different people first. Hence, he considers his personal contact with different people and especially those with informal power ('a product manager somewhere who says what he or she wants') as crucial for understanding what the customer values. And *without this personal contact he cannot create value for the customer with an interaction or product that the customer appreciates* ('I won't have a chance').

In the light of the salesperson's comments and interaction discussed above, I suggest that the customer relationship is considered valuable for the salesperson, as it is the necessary starting condition to be able to create value for the customer. Hence, with new customers or those where they lack personal contact with the decision makers, the salespeople have difficulty in creating value for the customer because they feel that they do not know how to go about it. .

#### *Story two*

Finally, I propose that a strong relationship gives the salesperson a better leverage position towards the customer and the own company and hence more security in their work.

'If you don't know what affects the people then you will never understand what is going to happen in a year or six months from now. And if you are not present you will not notice this. (...) If the others open up towards you, you get a lot of information about the motives. (...) You hear when bosses are changed or when the staff feels that they don't earn enough money and say that they want to change. So you can pull many strings and find out who really has the informal power.' (David)

*A little later, David tells me a story that I want to relate to his statement. He says that he knows that customer Ne's tender that opens this year is for a product which runs out next year, so David plans to offer with a very competitive price without losing too much money, in order to prevent any competitor getting a foot in at the customer.*

The quote above seems to indicate again the importance of personal contact with the customer. David talks about what '*affects*' people, about their motives, and what they feel, which suggests that he refers to the emotions of his customer



contacts that he needs to know about in order to maintain the relationship ('understand what is going to happen in a year or six months from now'). David's statement portrays the salesperson who knows what happens in the everyday work of the individual customer contacts in a power position ('pull many strings'). The salesperson who manages to encourage their contacts to '*open up*' towards them, learns about the emotional and rational reasons behind the decisions and are thus also able to influence them. In particular contact with those who have the informal power is what seems to put the salesperson into the position to be able to shape the course of the interaction. The short story of David suggests how his involvement in the company puts him into a powerful position that *enables him to influence and steer the customer's acts by means of his own acts to his own advantage.*

The personal contact described here is not the personal relationship based on mutual favors, where the customer might give the order to the salesperson because he or she likes him or her or because he or she has been invited to a meal. It is rather what David knows about the different contacts, what emotionally affects them, the reasons behind their acts and what they feel about their colleagues or bosses and what they are planning to do, that enables him to somewhat influence their acts and steer the interactions and relationship. In this case, it enables David to secure the overall relationship, i.e. by not letting a new competitor in. This way the salesperson might establish quite a powerful position in the relationship with the customer whether or not each individual contact is aware of this or affected by it.

### *Story three*

'He's as safe as a bank, I can put him in every budget plan year after year, and the price is also good. I have no idea what would need to happen for another supplier to get a chance.'

In this quote Karl uses the bank symbol to describe this particular customer's loyalty towards him. It is questionable whether a bank symbolizes safety for everyone, however he expresses what he calls '*safe*' in different ways, for example the '*planning year after year*'. The bank metaphor usually suggests that people take a low risk by putting their money into a bank account, they might not make much out of it but they will not lose the money (even the symbolic meaning of the bank will probably have changed for many people post crisis 2008/9). Translated into the customer this could mean that while Karl might

not make a huge return with the customer, he can rely on him, since he can *'plan him into every budget'*. The statement suggests that Karl gets a *feeling of reliability* from this customer, knowing that he will not just switch to the competition and that he will not reduce his orders.

This reliability of a customer could mean several things for the salesperson. One of the most obvious ones, loyalty in purchasing that Karl also seems to refer to, could mean for the salesperson that they do not need to worry about losing the customer. Losing a customer usually means that the salesperson is to find new business elsewhere, either with existing customers or with new ones, and it is therefore likely to signify more work for them. Hence, being able to rely on a customer might be valuable for the salesperson as *he or she might face a less work intensive and stressful situation*. While in the interpretation above, the value of the relationship lies in the understanding of the contact people and hence the powerful position towards the customer, this statement could suggest that the loyalty of the customer signifies security for the salesperson in the own company ('put him into every budget plan year after year'). The salesperson might gain a better *leverage towards the own company* with a strong customer relationship. To elaborate this claim I propose the following interpretation of David's statement:

'The customer relationship is the life insurance for a salesperson. Of course it is also risky in case the customer should say that they do not need you anymore. But that is the only insurance that you have because I mean, put it this way, if the competition calls, you will easily have a new job.'

This salesperson uses another symbol suggesting security, life insurance, to describe the customer relationship. From the quote one could get the impression that the customer relationship is a personal matter for the salesperson, as with the change of employer, the customer relationship would remain, or at least that kind of customer relationship that the salesperson considers as safe. The salesperson maneuvers him- or herself into a position where they are the single partner for the customer and the main association of the customer with the supplier company. This enables the salesperson to have a very different standing in the own company, to an extent that the company is almost dependent on keeping the salesperson in order to retain the customer. Hence, the statement proposes taking the security provided by a customer relationship for a salesperson even further, in that it could enable the salesperson to apply pressure on the own company and hence increase the company's dependency on this salesperson.



# Chapter Ten - Making Sales Interactions Valuable

In Chapters 6 to 9 I have stayed close to the empirical material interpreting the different interactions with regard to the salespeople's acts or activities in which they attempt to create value for the customer but also for themselves. The subchapters dealing with different empirical value constructs are not always entirely selective since there are always several aspects that could be interpreted as value in the interaction for both the salesperson and the customer. In order to avoid making the interpretations too confusing or repetitive, I often had to choose for which of the protagonists I consider this interaction the most valuable, and which of the values I consider as the most dominant or striking. Hence, some of the interactions still leave room for the reader to carry on interpreting the empirical threads that I have not followed. While the previous chapters present the different acts or activities in detail, this chapter attempts to discuss the social and symbolic processes that seem to cut across the different empirical themes. Still close to the empirical reality, these processes abstract from the detailed descriptions of the idiosyncratic interactions and lead to more generalizable, theoretical renderings.

In the following, I will describe the previously presented activities in the salesperson's interactions as parts of social and symbolic processes of *evaluation and influence*. Salespeople evaluate the interaction with regard to the own value and they evaluate it for the customer by interpreting the customer's acts and reactions or by imagining the value for the customer. With an impression of what is judged as valuable, the salesperson acts in order to influence these evaluation processes thus *making the interactions valuable*.

# Evaluation Process

With people interacting with themselves (covert) and others (overt) and interpreting these interactions (Charon, 2007), the evaluation process takes place throughout the interaction, and influences the course of action. When making the interactions valuable for themselves, salespeople seem to interpret the interaction in relation to their own situation, and in order to create value for the customer, the salesperson considers what is valuable for the customer. This happens either by interpretation of the customer's actions and reactions or by imagination based on previous interactions or role taking.

## **Interpreting the customer's acts and reactions**

Chapters 6 and 7 differ from the others because they suggest that the customers are somewhat explicit about what they want to 'get out of' the interaction. They usually start the interaction with a question or request addressed to the salesperson at the current interaction or with a preceding one via a phone call or email.

In Chapter 6, the concrete roles of the salesperson and customer and their definitions of the situations seem to evolve and shape throughout the interaction. In all these interactions, however, the customer seems not only to have a specific goal in mind for the interaction with the salesperson but also clear expectations on how the salesperson should act to pursue the customer's goals. In these interactions, it appears that the customer influences the course of the interaction often to reach the outcome they are aiming for; the salesperson seems to act according to his or her interpretation of the customer's acts in directing the interaction. For example, in the interaction between Adam and Peter, it looks as though Peter is intending to find out from the salesperson whether his design is doable and Peter asks very specific questions throughout the entire interaction with Adam. Adam seems to gather from Peter's questions that he would appreciate the salesperson to share his insights and opinion.

In most of the interactions in Chapter 7 the customers seem to have established through a previous interaction or gesture what they want they want to accomplish. The customer defines the own situation as problematic and with the

act of asking the salesperson to come by, they appear to be influencing the salesperson's definition of the interaction to be about 'problem solving'. With this act, the customer also communicates their expectations of the salesperson shaping the salesperson's role as problem solver. These definitions of the roles and the situation that seem to be established prior to the observed interaction, are agreed upon and continued throughout this interaction. The salespeople are concerned that the interaction has a positive outcome for the customer and adapt their acts in interaction to what they think the customer wants them to do, in this case to improve their situation. Since the customer does not seem to have any views on how the salesperson can help them with solving the problem, the salesperson seems to be more involved in steering the interaction towards an outcome that he considers to be an improved situation for the customer. Throughout the interaction the exact character of the salesperson's role changes depending on how the salesperson interprets the reactions of the customer in the interaction. In some interactions it seems that the customer's goal is to explore the reason for the appearance of the perceived problem with the help of the salesperson's expertise. In other interactions they do not seem to care about the expertise and only want the salesperson to organize a quick fix that improves the situation. In the interaction between Markus and Matthew the customer's goal either changes throughout the interaction with the apparent achievement of one goal, or it could be that the salesperson has misinterpreted what the goal or intention of the customer in the interaction was.

The reason why the interactions in these chapters differ is that in Chapter 6 the customer has a very specific idea of the outcome of the interaction and how the salesperson should act to achieve it. Thus the customer seems to be the one that steers the interaction. In Chapter 7, however, the customer seems to have a goal with the interaction, that is, to improve the situation, but does not seem to direct the interaction in the same way, as they have no idea how the salesperson should help to accomplish it. What is common to the interactions in both chapters, however, is that the salespeople seem to direct their acts towards what they think the customer wants to 'get out of' the interaction. This is based on the acts and reactions taking place in the current interaction. Hence, the *salesperson evaluates the value for the customer in accordance with the interpretations of what the customer seems to want to 'get out of' the interaction.*

Some of the interactions indicate that it is a problematic process for the salesperson to interpret what is valuable for the individual customer based on their acts, especially when interacting with more than one customer contact at the same time. In these interactions, the salesperson is confronted with different individuals who value different things related to their situation signaling different and contradicting actions and reactions from the customer; this makes it difficult for the salesperson to interpret what is valued by the customer. The interactions in the discussions about this dilemma are those of ‘manage projects’ in Chapter 8. While in Adam’s interaction the display is valuable for the marketing manager as it is new and original, attracting customer attention, it might be valuable for the display packaging specialist when the display can be easily integrated into the existing processes and the assembly time decreases and the developer seems to be happy when the display can be assembled automatically. It seems that salespeople either attempt to find a common denominator for what different individual customer contacts seem to appreciate, or to focus on those individuals who influence the others in their interactions and concentrate on the interpretation of their acts and reactions. What these interactions show is that there might or not be a clear collective dimension of value.

### **Imagining the customer’s perspective**

What distinguishes the interactions in Chapter 8 is that the salesperson does not seem to interpret what the customer considers of value in the light of what he or she does. Whether this is because the salesperson is unclear about the customer’s acts or because he chooses to follow his routines is not apparent in these interactions. However, in this chapter, it appears that the *salesperson’s acts are not the result of adjusting them to those of the customer*. In Chapter 9, the case is the same but for different reasons. The salesperson’s internal interactions do not involve the customer and therefore the salesperson is unable to interpret any eventual reactions from the customer. I suggest that in these internal discussions with his colleagues the salesperson, by seeing the situation from the customer’s perspective, can in his imagination form an idea of what the customer wants or appreciates.

In some interactions the salesperson seems to *act based on assumptions* about what the customer appreciates against the background of *previous meetings* or

even of reactions from other customers. For example, Adam used to drive the samples to one customer and interpreted their reactions throughout previous meetings as positive and appreciative, so he decides to do the same for his new customer, imagining that they would also appreciate the gesture. At some point, however, the salesperson must form an evaluation for the first time and decide to act accordingly, and some interactions in this study suggest that the salesperson does so through *role taking*, i.e. *imagining the customer's perspective*. For example, David's comment about lazy humans proposes that he, the salesperson has tried to imagine himself in the customer's role or situation. This seems to be facilitated by a good relationship where the salesperson learns about the customer's perspective on matters through their expression of opinions, motives, emotions, etc. David seems to think that the customer's biggest worry is time pressure. So putting himself in her position with the different products and work that the she, the customer, has to cope with, he imagines that he would appreciate having a lighter workload if he was in her position, so it is likely that the customer does so too. Hence, while the salespeople's assumptions of what is valuable for the customer, as discussed in the first chapters, is based on their interpretation of the immediate interaction, in other interactions the salespeople seem to act based on assumptions they have built up over time while working with the customer or in some situations through an empathetic act of trying to see the customer's perspective on their own acts.

The salesperson's evaluation process is problematic, as mentioned previously, also because the customer's evaluation process is dynamic and ambiguous. They might, for example, face a conflict of individual preferences and collective judgments. Hence, what symbolizes value for the individual customer contact in the interaction might be different from what this customer contact interprets to be valuable for the relevant others, such as colleagues or management. Salespeople might assume the customer value to be a system improvement of efficiency or effectiveness. In this case it seems that the salesperson assumes the customer contact's value judgement to be influenced by collective judgment from colleagues or managers. System improvements or monetary value could be considered as socialized values as they symbolize the survival and wellbeing of a company. But some of these interactions have suggested that if the customer contacts do not evaluate these acts as valuable with regard to their individual situation, the collective dimension does not seem to be important in the individual customer's evaluation process.



Think back to the interaction between Edward and Kai in Chapter 8 where the customer faces extra work when the salesperson acts according to what would be considered a process or business improvement, where he optimizes a packaging to save the customer costs. However, judging from the course of this interaction, what seems more valuable to the customer contact is to avoid more work and simply keep the packaging as it is. Another interaction suggesting the same happens between Elisabeth and David in Chapter 6, where the customer is more concerned about herself than anything that might be considered valuable for the company's wellbeing. Elisabeth says that she wants to get rid of another supplier because it means more work for her. She prefers not to have the work and instead gives this supply job to David who she knows will relieve her of the task. From a company perspective, however, it might be problematic, since it shifts more volume to a supplier that already has a big share and makes the company potentially more dependent.

Moreover, the salesperson seems to have difficulties to imagine the customer's value when they do not know the individual customer contact. Chapter 9 that discusses the importance of securing the customer relationship for the salesperson highlights how crucial it seems to be for the salesperson to 'know' the individual people they are working with. Boris' and David's statements both underline the idea that they need to know what matters to the customers as person ('personal contact', 'what affects the people') in order to be able to make the interaction valuable for them. Hence, the salesperson's ability to interpret and imagine the customer's evaluation is influenced by what the salesperson knows has about the aspects that influence the individual customer's thinking process. The above difficulties in the observed sales interactions suggest the *importance of the individual preference, the individual value dimension, in the evaluation* or value interpretation.

## Influence Process

In the following, three different ways or strategies are discussed in which the salesperson acts to influence the previously discussed evaluation processes positively, thus shaping and directing the interaction to make it valuable.

### **Pursuing the customer's goal**

In most customer interactions salespeople seem to adapt their lines of action to what they interpret will *encourage positive reactions*. In the interactions discussed in Chapter 6 the customers direct the interaction by asking specific questions, requests or reactions. Thus, the salesperson tries to make the interaction valuable for the customer by attending to or helping to pursue the customer's seemingly apparent goals and intentions. If what seems to make the interactions valuable for the customer is the achievement of their goals, the value that is constructed is idiosyncratic to the interaction as the customer usually has a specific intention or goal in each one. Hence, the salesperson influences the customer's evaluation by acts that appear to bring the customer closer to accomplishing their goal. So *making valuable, and construction of value evolve around the accomplishment of the customer's goal*.

In the interaction between Adam and Peter in Chapter 6, the customer seems keen to learn from the salesperson about the technical possibilities of constructing a specific design that the customer had in mind. By showing the Adam the design, asking him specific questions about its construction, and inquiring about the options mentioned by Adam, Peter appears to demonstrate an intention to get Adam's input and opinion on his own vague design idea. However, it is not the salesperson's knowledge as such, but what the customer learns in the dialogue with the salesperson, 'the expert insight', related to the own design idea that seems to be valuable for the customer. Since the overall goal of the customer appears to be to present this display idea to the colleagues to get started on with the project, the insight might also be valuable for the customer as it enables the latter to gain more credibility and legitimacy to realize the own idea. Hence, this learning dialogue for the customer just then might mean that he can do a better job and get recognition for it internally. In another interaction discussed in the same chapter, between Oscar and Philip, it also

seems to be knowledge that the salesperson needs in order to provide the customer with what he asks for in the interaction. The way in which the salesperson tries to make the interaction valuable to the customer is, however, different, since the customer's goal does not seem to be about the learning or insight but about the 'delivery' of a tray. In order to understand how exactly the salesperson can accomplish the customer's goal of a suitable packaging, he needs more information, but since the provision of this display is what the customer has asked for at the beginning of the interaction, and thus what he seeks to 'get out of' the interaction, the salesperson tries to assure the customer that he will accomplish this goal. Here, the salesperson constructs the image of the expert in the interaction with the customer by using technical terminology to assure the customer of being a capable partner to take care of the customer's goal.

Along the same lines, I could discuss the other interactions in Chapter 6 and many more interactions that are not part of the chapters. Another way to think about these interactions is that the customer with his or her acts in the interaction seems to signal clear expectations, for example, by calling the salesperson and asking for help. In the face of these acts, the salesperson does not seem to have much choice in taking on the role that is expected of him or her and do what he or she thinks the customer wants to 'get out of' the interaction. Hence, it seems that *not adapting the lines of action to the customer's indications, would mean to influence the customer's evaluation process negatively*, hence, not make it valuable.

## **Reducing customer uncertainty**

Pursuing the customer's goals seems to be one way to influence the customer's evaluation process positively. This makes the interaction valuable in interactions where customers indicate the direction in the interaction as to what role he or she wants the salesperson to take on. What, however, happens in interactions where the customer gives less direction?

The interactions are all similar in that the customer perceives him- or herself to be in a problematic or trouble situation and asks the salesperson to help. The customers have a notion of what their problem is and their goal in the

interaction with the salesperson is to overcome this problem and improve the own situation. Still, one could say that the salespeople have more room to maneuver in order to influence the course of the interaction as well as to some extent shape the helper or problem-solver role. This can be a matter of being the expert that explains the problem to the customer, the broker that organizes the resources needed to provide a quick fix solution or partner that relieves the customer of stress by assuring the commitment to help. Instead of discussing these interactions as value accomplishment with goal achievement, they suggest the *management and reduction of the customer's uncertainty to be the attempt to make the interaction valuable*. Throughout the interactions in Chapter 7 the salesperson seems to interpret the improved situation to be perceived as valuable for the customer. Since the problematic or trouble situation usually relates to the uncertainty about how to improve the situation, the salesperson, by achieving the latter apparently reduces the customer's uncertainty in the face of the present problem or situation.

The customer's uncertainties have different sources in sales interactions. In some, the customer seems to lack the cognitive ability, the knowledge, to deal with the own situation and to maneuver themselves out of the situation they define as problematic. The salespeople play along in these interactions recreating the own image as helper and the customer as the one to be helped. The salesperson in his acts of 'explaining the problem' to the customer aims to influence the customer's perception of the ability to solve the problem. With the customer's understanding of the perceived problem, the salesperson is *educating the customer to be able to cope with the own problem*, and seemingly reduces the customer's uncertainty. In other interactions the customer's uncertainty about improving the own situation seems to stem from the lack of resource access, especially when facing time pressure ('quick fixes'). In such situations the salesperson seems to be able to make the interaction valuable by improving the situation using the own network and resource access, for example, in the short-notice supply of a packaging or tools for a packaging. Hence, reducing the uncertainty in these interactions is about *providing the customer with resource access*. A third source of uncertainty for the customer facing the own trouble situation, seems to be about whether the salesperson is the right one, able and willing, to improve their situation and help them out of trouble. The salesperson portrays him- or herself as helper in the interactions and seems to attempt to *assure the customer of the own ability and willingness to improve the customer's situation*. This could either be by acts signaling the own expertise or the

commitment, for example by cancelling other customer meetings, driving all the way to Holland to visit the customer etc. In these situations the customer's uncertainty seems to be reduced by the salesperson's influencing acts assuring the customer of improving his or her situation.

Also Chapter 8 suggests salesperson's acts of reducing the customer's uncertainty about the salesperson being the right partner, however not in the face of specific trouble situations, but rather during the run of day-to-day work. With the work routines and the extra commitment that salespeople show when they 'take on the customer's work responsibilities', 'do small favors' or 'manage projects', salespeople's acts suggest an aim to *prevent customer uncertainty* vis-à-vis the salesperson. This *trust* that salespeople seem to build with the customers by supporting whenever they can, portraying the competence (Chapter 7) and the commitment (Chapter 8) towards the customer appears to make the customers' life easier and reduce eventual uncertainties in the ability to cope with their daily work.

### **Increasing security**

The previous two strategies for influencing the interaction for it to be valuable concern value for the customer. For interactions to work, both individuals have to cooperate, that means to allow the other to achieve their respective goals by participating and contributing to the interaction in the long-run. For the salesperson to make the interaction valuable for him- or herself, they seem to manipulate and shape their course of action or future interaction in the own interest, either through the customer's feeling of obligation or his or her dependency. Both acts seem to secure the customer relationship from the salesperson's perspective (Chapters 6-8). While the customer relationship is not the only value that salespeople attempt to create in interaction, thinking up different types of reciprocal acts of favor but also more easy-going and fun interaction with the customer (Chapter 6), it still seems to be the dominant one in most of the interactions of this work. The reason is rather obvious since the customer relationship is what legitimizes the job for the salesperson and their existence in their own company, as it is what makes them valuable to those individuals who depend on the survival of the company (Chapter 9). Hence, creating obligations and increasing customer dependencies in the customer interactions, as well as decreasing own uncertainty in the internal interactions

are all manifest in the salesperson's strategy to make the interaction valuable for him- or herself. This is done by increasing the own security vis-à-vis the customer and the own company.

### *Creating obligations*

There seems to lie in the nature of the salesperson customer interaction a *power imbalance* that manifests itself in that the salesperson's attempt to make the interaction valuable is usually primarily dedicated to the customer since the value for the salesperson is contingent on the customer to evaluate the interaction positively. This power imbalance might not be equally strong in every market context, but often it is even the socially created and accepted roles of the salesperson whose work purpose only starts with the customer's need, want, problem or desire.

This situation seems to encourage salespeople to invest efforts into interactions even though they face the risk of not getting anything out of it. Adam, for example, invests time and effort in the conversation with Peter trying to give him his 'expert insights' and input on his project idea (Chapter 6). While Peter comes out of the interaction with ideas and more knowledge on the matter, Adam neither knows whether this project is going to happen nor whether he gets it. The time span over which the interaction in some of the customer relationships stays unbalanced seems exceptional in the context of non-standardized selling. The project management interaction of Adam where he has invested a year of work already without that appearing to have gotten anything in return for it so far illustrates this claim (Chapter 7). One could argue that Adam gained more insights into the customer and more experience in handling a new problem or design, but otherwise what seems to make the interaction valuable for him, judging from his behavior and comments, is getting the project. Looking at the interaction between Edward and Kai, one could assume that if Edward would not have adapted the idea that he thought was valuable for Kai but also himself to what Kai wanted him to do, it is most likely that Kai would not have appreciated the interaction (Chapter 8). It would have created more trouble internally for Kai or he might have had to seek another salesperson to pursue his goal of the supply of a specific packaging. Hence, the salesperson, Edward, would not have been able to make the interaction valuable for himself with this packaging, as the customer was not evaluating it positively.

Given the salesperson's customer dependency, making the interaction valuable for the customer is often contingent on salesperson value, however, not vice versa. Hence, in most interactions *the salesperson attempts to make them valuable for the customer and hopes to create obligations from the customer encouraging reciprocal behavior in the future*. The customer neither has any contractual obligation at most stages of the interaction nor are they necessarily expected to give something in return for the salesperson's efforts. The challenge in getting the return for creating value for the customer is rooted in the value ambiguity that makes a judgment of what is equal or fair difficult if not impossible. The reciprocal behavior could either be different but of equal value defined by the participants or the same against the same (Gouldner, 1960). While the latter is very unlikely since both parties face different situations and have different intentions with the interaction, the former is problematic since it presumes the comparability of value. Even though salespeople have a notion about what the customer values are, they would not be able to translate them into an equal value for them, simply because they will not know how much the customer values something. One could argue that because of the time span between the interactions over the relationship period, the value comparability becomes more difficult but the value imbalance also becomes less obvious so that salespeople end up having to take the risk and trust that the customer will reciprocate their efforts.

### *Increasing customer dependency*

While the salesperson attempts to reduce the customer's uncertainty to make the interaction valuable for them, this uncertainty has been interpreted in Chapter 8 to be valuable for the salesperson as it changes the dependency relationship. The relationship between the *customer's and salesperson's uncertainty seems to be inversely related*, since the customer's uncertainty seems to increase the dependency on the salesperson and this dependency is suggested to influence the salesperson's uncertainty. When holding the power position in the interaction, the salesperson faces less uncertainty. The reason why the salesperson holds this power position when the customer is facing uncertainty is that he or she is valuable to the customer or has the ability to make the interaction valuable for the latter by reducing uncertainty. Hence, by reducing customer uncertainty, the salesperson faces the dilemma of diminishing the own possibility to increase customer dependency. As already suggested in Chapters 7 and 8, the *customer's dependency, whether it is through increasing their uncertainty or differentiating and*

*making themselves indispensable, is valuable for the salesperson* as it decreases the uncertainty at the face of the customer relationship.

Chapter 8 provides some examples where salespeople influence the customer in that they perceive their own situation as problematic ('define problems'), allowing the salesperson to portray himself as helper and establish a dependency relationship that is in the salesperson's favor ('keep up the helper image'). In the attempt to do things differently when making the interaction valuable for the customer, the salesperson seeks to be indispensable when the customer appreciates this salesperson's acts (Chapter 8).

### *Decreasing own uncertainty*

A source of uncertainty for the salesperson, other than the customer relationship, is his or her dependence on the internal colleagues for support. This lies in the nature of non-standardized selling and the relationship between salespeople and internal colleagues, which is often characterized by conflict of interests and no formal hierarchy. Hence, while the interaction between customer and salesperson survives by both individuals getting something out of the interaction in the long run, the salesperson's internal interactions would exist even without an interest in making the interaction valuable for the other individual. Instead, the interaction is formalized and part of a bureaucratic organization.

Hence, for the salesperson to decrease this source of uncertainty that might risk the customer relationship, they need the cooperation of their colleagues. One attempt from salespeople to achieve this is to influence the colleagues' interpretation of what is valuable in that it is closer to their own. By involving them emotionally in the customer interactions, by bringing them physically closer to them, taking them along to the customer, trying to give them feedback, and building personal relationships with them, salespeople attempt to make it valuable for the internal colleagues to satisfy the customer or help the salesperson. The interactions of those salespeople who have good relationships with their internal colleagues seem to work through mutual favors and obligations. A different attempt to reduce this uncertainty is to control as much of an internal colleague's interactions with the customer as possible. Since this attempt often does not necessarily entail the salesperson taking the internal colleague's interests into account, it often results in conflict.





# Chapter Eleven - Conclusions

At the beginning of this work I have argued that to understand how interpreted and contextually sensitive value comes about in business interactions, research needs to look at what is happening in the interaction between those individuals involved. In order to satisfy my purpose of understanding how the activities and processes in the interaction between salesperson and customer bring about value, I have assumed a theoretical perspective, the one of symbolic interactionism that allows for a focus on individuals and the interpretive nature of value in the empirical study of business interactions (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007). Value as created in social and symbolic interactions means that neither the salesperson nor the customer can bring value into the interaction or control the symbolic meaning of the other. In the previous five chapters, I have elaborated on the salesperson's attempt to create value sales interactions in the form of different activities (Chapters 6-9) and more general processes (Chapter 10). The processes of evaluation and influence that I have depicted in the previous chapter describe the salesperson's attempts to create value beyond the specific detail in each and every interaction presented in Chapters 6-9 but they also explain this variety of interactions and acts. It is now time to resume why the insights of this study enrich the understanding of value creation in business marketing context.

## Value Creation Retold

I want to return to the sales interaction presented in the beginning of this work to illustrate my conclusions. I have already then argued why value needs to be understood as interpretive and contextual in order to start making sense of the given interaction. The first impression is that the salesperson's acts in the interaction do not seem to encourage positive reactions from the customer.

There are many reasons why the salesperson acts as he does.<sup>7</sup> He could for example have misinterpreted the customer's acts in the previous interaction, leading him to assume that the customer would appreciate what he was doing. He could have acted according to his routine, creating a cost saving, something that in his eyes the customer used to always appreciate before. Or the salesperson could have imagined that the customer would appreciate a cost saving because as a purchaser in a company within a price-sensitive industry, cost saving seems an obvious value. And finally, he could have simply prioritized his interest in creating own value, assuming that a cost saving he can demonstrate for the customer brings him into a better position for the price negotiation.

The customer's reactions, however, suggest that for the customer it is more valuable to get the packaging as it used to be and not to optimize the use of the pallet in order to quickly move on to another project; for him it seems to symbolize trouble rather than improvement. The customer evaluates the interaction with regard to the own personal situation and in his acts towards the salesperson signals this personal intention or goal, that is to get the packaging as it is. The salesperson aligns his acts to what the interaction indicates him to be valued by the customer and changes the packaging. Hence, the salesperson seems to interpret the customer's acts to imply that the goal is to get the normal packaging without any changes, which could mean extra work or trouble for him. He therefore acts in such a way as to accomplish this customer goal in the interaction. It could have been of financial value for the customer company and also for the supplier when the cost saving enabled the salesperson to ask for a better price. The crux, however, seems to be that both individuals act with preference for what is valuable for themselves in the given situation instead of what might be valuable for relevant others; for the customer a trouble-free continuation of day-to-day business and for the salesperson a satisfied customer.

Based on interpretations along these lines of many different sales encounters subject to this work, I have conceptualized the salesperson's attempts to create value as endeavors to *make the interactions valuable*. The salespeople engage in the process of evaluating the interaction with regard to their own value and to that of the customer as well as influencing this value judgment through acts in interaction. Whether the salesperson's evaluation of customer value is through interpretation of customer acts, by means of imagination or based on

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<sup>7</sup> In this observed example interaction, salesperson and customer are men (Edward and Kai).

assumptions from previous interactions, this process always depends on the customer's definition of the own situation, the customer's actions based on these definitions and the salesperson's interpretation of them. The process in which the salesperson attempts to influence the evaluation processes for customer value and own value is contingent on this evaluation.

Based on the insights gained throughout this work, I want to introduce two main conclusions. Firstly, the *acts and reactions of the individuals in the interaction become the main reference point* for interpretation in the construction of value, when an exchange object becomes rare. Hence, value lies in what the acts and reactions of the other individual, not a specific object, symbolize to him or her. When a customer buys a new packaging design, tangible objects might play a role in the interaction, such as the design in the form of a drawing or a packaging sample, and a contract or order in the form of a paper document or email. The meaning of each of these objects is formed by the assessment of the individuals involved. So for the customer, the design might symbolize improvement, prestige, a fulfilled project, etc. and for the salesperson the contract might symbolize increased earnings, prestige, credibility from the customer, etc. The way in which the salesperson deals with the objects in interaction influences the symbolic significances of the customers, which might be more or less well-established, given the customer is not resistant to the salesperson's definitions. As this work shows in B2B non-standardized markets, many interactions do not entail tangible objects for exchange. In this case, the salesperson or customer acts move even more so into the center of the construction of value, as they are the main reference for the evaluation process, and thus powerful in influencing it.

Secondly, while the single customer's interpretation might be influenced by a collective dimension, e.g. the judgment of colleagues or managers, the interactions in this study suggest that *the single customer contact often forms evaluations based on what is valuable for him or her in the interaction, given the personal situation*. Smith (1989) argues for the importance of the individual as opposed to the collective dimension of value in idiosyncratic and ambiguous exchange situations such as auctions that lack comparability. The salesperson-customer interactions in the non-standardized B2B marketing context are of such an idiosyncratic and ambiguous character as elaborated in the beginning of this work.

## Contributions

This study substantiates an understanding of value in business interactions as emergent from and continuously changing throughout a social and symbolic interaction between individuals in business context embracing economic but also non-economic goals and interests. *Describing value creation in business interactions as processes of evaluation and influence, thus shaping the other's interpretation that is based on the own personal situation, presents an alternative conceptualization of value creation in business marketing* to the ruling notion of economic exchange processes creating systemic values. Thus, this study enriches the understanding of value creation in business marketing by offering a *different angle to the discussion, one that attempts to comprehend the individuals meeting in interpersonal interaction doing business*. The interpretations and conclusions of this study might challenge some assumptions in the relevant literature but primarily enrich the discussions of one of the most popular topics in business marketing where it overlooks the subjectivity of value judgment and its dynamic nature.

### Business marketing literature

While it is certainly important to have a higher-level perspective on business interactions when investigating the theoretical concept of value and its creation (e.g. Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Corsaro & Snehota, 2011; Ford, 2011; Haas et al., 2012), I have challenged these dialogues within the business marketing literature by portraying a misfit of its dominant level of analysis and the conceptualization of value being interpretive and contextual. As a trade-off for focusing on the complexity of company networks, much research within this literature stream has left the discussion of the early work where the individual was at the center of the business interactions (Håkansson & Östberg, 1975; Håkansson & Johanson, 1977). Hence, the *'return' to the focus on the individual's role* is my intended contribution to the value discussions within business marketing literature.

One insight from this work that I would like to contemplate as one of the most important in the light of this literature is that individuals who meet in the context of business interactions, such as salesperson and customer contact, do

not act exclusively as company representatives. They act driven by their own intentions and goals, and these might be influenced by those of the company but not necessarily so. This entails that the focus on the individuals is not only important because they are the ones linking and integrating resources and activities in business interactions (Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; 1995; Håkansson et al., 2009) but also because they are ultimately acting in their own interest. Hence, underlying the discussion of value creation around actors integrating resources in business interactions is the empirical reality of individuals influencing the interactions so as to make them valuable, given the own personal situation. These interactions bring about value for the individuals, often non-economic, social ones, that do not need to be in line with what would be considered systemic value from a company perspective. Hence, *losing sight of the individuals means overlooking much of what is happening in business interactions and what eventually sustains them*. These interactions between individuals, even though in larger numbers, are what constitute business interactions. If interactions are not considered worthy by those individuals involved, they will find a way to exit or at least minimize the interaction frequency.

When the IMP talks about activity links, resource ties and actor bonds that are said to constitute value in business interactions (IMP, 1982; Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995) or when service marketing literature, which has been adopted by business marketing researchers discussing value, defines value creation as resource integration (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a; Vargo et al., 2009; Grönroos, 2011), it is an important insight from this thesis that activities or resources *will only ever be valuable when embedded in the interpersonal interaction of the individuals involved*. This study complements by discussing these resources and competences as subjected to the individuals' interpretive processes that construct the value in interaction.

In more concrete terms, when salespeople 'provide for what the customer wants' or 'improve customer situations', their technical understanding seems to be a key resource that they integrate into many of the customer interactions. In some interactions, the salesperson appears to use technical terminology in order to portray knowledge and build credibility towards the customer. When the salesperson's resource in the form of technical understanding, or more general knowledge, enables him or her to make the interaction valuable for the

customer, it is not the knowledge itself that is valuable. Instead, what is valuable in these interactions is what seemingly brings the customer closer to the own personal goals in the interaction, which could be the fulfillment of a specific want or an improved situation. For example, in an interaction where the customer's goal is to learn about the feasibility of a design idea that he or she wants to introduce as a new marketing concept, the salesperson needs some technical understanding or knowledge. With that the salesperson could use the right terminology, ask the right questions and give the right ideas, which positively influence the customer's interpretation of the interaction with regard to the own goal achievement. Hence, when the salesperson manages to create an image of an expert and to show integrity in giving answers to the customer's questions, the customer is more likely to feel that he or she has accomplished the purpose of the interaction and gotten closer to the overall goal of introducing the design idea internally. Consequently, the customer is likely to evaluate the interaction as positive. In another interaction the salesperson might use the own product and production knowledge to ask the customer specifying questions, serving to clarify the customer's wants. Moreover, by doing so this salesperson also demonstrates the right amount of concern and expertise to the customer thus assuring him or her of goal achievement during subsequent interactions, that is, to get an appropriate packaging for a product.

In these interactions salespeople use their knowledge to act in such a way as to influence the customer's evaluation of the interaction, for example, by managing the expert image, by helping the customer's understanding with answers to their questions. The same argumentation counts for other resources that could be identified in the different interactions, for example, the salesperson's time, labor or network. Hence, *the resources in themselves do not signify value; it is the salesperson's acts in using them to influence the customer's evaluation that make them valuable for the customer.* This insights is not only a step towards considering the notion of resource integration with respect to the individuals and their social context involved (Edvardsson et al., 2011) but they also provide insight into the empirical reality and practicality of value creation processes between businesses that seems to have been missed so far (Achrol & Kotler, 2006; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2009).

### *Value creation through goal accomplishment*

A recent attempt by Ford (2011) has been to conceptualize an IMP view of value and value creation. This defines value creation as problem solving and an interaction as valuable when it is interpreted by the individuals involved as bringing them closer to solving their respective problems. In the light of the present work, this conceptualization is a promising step in what seems to be the right direction.

This study has investigated many different interactions between individuals, however, as suspected, not all these could be argued to be about problem solving. Consequently, in the interaction between salesperson and customer there does not always need to be a problem perceived by either individual for the interaction to be considered valuable by them. In fact, as Ford (2011) claims, a problem needs to be perceived as such by those involved. Hence, for an interaction to be about problem solving one of the individuals needs to define their situation in some way as problematic. In the interactions in Chapter 7 ('improving customer situations'), the customers actually do so and ask the salesperson for help. This shows how contributing to solving the customer's problem or improving his or her situation is valuable for the latter. I have described three scenarios in which the salesperson helps the individual to solve problems, either by helping them understand the reason for the own perceived problem, by providing the necessary resources for 'fixing' the problem or by 'taking over' the problem, that is assuring the customer that the problem will be taken care of.

However, against the background of the present work, problem solving seems to be too narrow to describe the variety of day-to-day sales interactions that occur between businesses. There does not always need to be a problem for an interaction to happen and thus for an interaction to be valuable. Chapter 6 ('providing for what the customer wants') and Chapter 8 ('reducing customer workloads') illustrate sales encounters where none of those individuals involved seem to perceive their own situation as clearly problematic. In Chapter 6, the salesperson interprets the customer's acts in interaction in that the customer evaluates it positively when the salesperson does what they want the salesperson to do. It seems, that if the salesperson does not act according to what the customer so explicitly asks for, the latter would perceive the interaction in a negative light. In Chapter 8, the salespeople act in accordance with what they interpret from previous interactions to be appreciated by the customer, that is a



reduced workload. Based on these interactions, the day-to-day working life support provided by the salesperson seems to be very valuable for the customer when facing a stressful work situation.

Hence, an alternative conceptualization that I have proposed in this work and that seems to embrace the interactions under discussion is goal accomplishment. The salesperson attempts to make sales interactions valuable for the customer by *helping them accomplish their goals in the interaction or in the wider work context*. In most interactions of this study the salesperson acts in order to provide the explicit wants that the customer expresses in the interaction or to pursue the less explicit customer goal of getting out of a problematic situation. In others, the salesperson helps the customer to manage their day-to-day workload. The interpretations suggest that they support the customer contacts in achieving their goals at work, i.e. for example, finishing projects in time or making a good impression with the manager.

Summing up, this work suggests that the achievement of the own goals in the interaction is what makes the interactions valuable for the customer but also for the salesperson. This relates *back* to the argument about social interactions where *mutual goal achievement is crucial for successful continuation of the interaction* (Charon, 2007).

#### *Value creation by dealing with uncertainties*

Value creation in the IMP view also addresses dealing with the counterpart's uncertainties in interaction (Ford, 2011). This work substantiates that in fact many of the interactions seem to be about dealing with uncertainty, risk or trouble. This provides *insights into the salesperson's acts of increasing and decreasing customer uncertainties as a way of making the interaction valuable for the salesperson and the customer*. Uncertainties have been conceptualized as those that describe the inability of the customer to cope with the own problem, to know who to interact with for coping and to know about the specific fulfillment of the problem solving (Håkansson & Johanson, 1977; Ford, 2011). This work portrays those situations where the customer might experience uncertainty when facing a situation that he or she defines as problematic and does not know how to deal with. What seems to be most valuable for these customer's facing trouble situations is getting assurance from the salesperson that he or she is willing and capable to solve the customer's problem. But the salesperson could also decrease

the customer's uncertainty by educating them about the problem or providing them with tools or resources needed to solve it.

The obvious dilemma, however, lies in the salesperson's balancing of the customer's and the own uncertainty. While the customer's uncertainty enables the salesperson to be in a position of power where the customer is dependent on the salesperson to be released from uncertainty, the resolving of customer uncertainty puts the salesperson's position at risk. The customer dependency, however, is what seems to make the salesperson less uncertain or more secure since the customer relationship legitimizes the existence of salesperson's job. In this situation, decreasing customer uncertainty makes the interaction valuable for the customer, and at the same time potentially increases the salesperson's uncertainty and thus contradictory with the salesperson's own value. In order to make the interactions valuable for the salesperson he or she has to influence these uncertainties both ways, increasing as well as decreasing the customer uncertainty. Hence, the salesperson engages, for example, in problem solving but also in problem definition. He or she also continuously tries to maintain the role as helper and problem solver throughout interactions. Finally, salespeople might help the customers to cope with the day-to-day uncertainties in managing their work by showing them to be a committed and trustworthy partner, but at the same time they attempt to make themselves indispensable and the customer more dependent.

To sum up, in the act of decreasing uncertainties seems to lie value for both individuals, but decreasing that of the customer seems often to be at expense of increasing the salesperson's uncertainty and vice versa. In conclusion, I want to propose the *salesperson's acts in influencing the continuous alternation of increasing and reducing uncertainties* to be an attempt to make the interaction valuable for both parts.

### *Researching value empirically*

Considering the broad interest in the value concept, the lack of empirical exploration into the activities of value creation in business markets has been criticized (Payne & Holt, 2001; Ulaga, 2001; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005). The existing empirical research has used the translation of the perceived trade-off between benefits and costs (Wilson & Jantrania, 1994; Gwinner et al. 1998; Walter et al., 2001; Ulaga, 2003). They have thus translated value into assumingly less complex concepts to avoid confronting interviewees with an ambiguous concept such as value. Besides other problems with this approach, it stays static and remains unclear about the activities around this value.

This study has suggested investigating the construction of value in business interactions empirically by exploring what seems to make the interactions valuable for those individuals involved. This is an approach that is to the best of my knowledge new to business marketing, where the focus on the individual just as the ethnography-type study design are less prevalent. The methodological perspective of symbolic interactionism argues that one can make sense of the individual's intentions, goals and interpretations based on their acts and reactions in interactions. Combined with the research technique of shadowing, this makes it possible to talk about assumptions of value underlying the observable acts and reactions. Additionally, the sensitizing concepts of joint action and role taking provide a frame for interpreting each individual's acts in relation to the other's acts and reactions, taking the own and the other's interests into account. Hence, assuming salespeople intend to make the interaction valuable, their acts and reasoning enable the researcher to make assumptions about what they interpret to be valuable for themselves and the customer.

This study is an example of empirically addressing the construction or coming about of value in interactions between individuals interpreted against the background of the acts and reactions in this interaction. To sum up, I propose the introduction of symbolic interactionism to business interactions such as in selling, where value is assumed to come about. This can be combined with the methodology of observing interactions as an approach that enables researchers to talk about a complex and disputed concept, such as value, by staying close to the empirical reality in which individuals work out the interaction together.

### *Empirical value constructs*

A side-product of the study's exploration of value creation in sales interactions are the different empirical value constructs (Payne & Holt, 2001; Ulaga, 2001; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005). The study depicts these based on what the salesperson either assumes or interprets for the customer in their effort to make the interaction valuable or that seem to be underlying those acts with which the salesperson attempts to get something out of the interaction. The four themes identified in this study suggest that the interactions are valuable for the customer when they get what they want (without trouble), when they decrease their uncertainty and reduce their workload. The different interactions discussed within the subchapters seem to bring about different customer value constructs for example expert insights or learning, assurance, decreased risk, quick fixes, relief, small favors, etc. For the salesperson interactions seem to be valuable when they satisfy the customer and increase customer dependency or secure customer relationships overall. The customer's feeling of obligation, a customer reciprocal act, being indispensable or, what seems to embrace the other constructs, security could be considered value constructs.

The different value constructs are all results of an interaction process that embrace acts of influencing and interpreting with the use of symbols, especially language, or physical objects. They are related to the context or situation of the individual since meaning-making is always related to the individual in a situation. Moreover, what is considered valuable in the interaction changes when one of the individuals influence the other's symbolic reality or definition of their situation. As a consequence, *the different empirical constructs are idiosyncratic to and dynamic in every interaction*. This makes any attempt to summarize them difficult and meaningless; also because it would not be reasonable to make a claim for completeness in this list of constructs.

I have argued before that whether the individuals always 'actually' perceive these interactions as valuable according to my interpretation is not certain. However, the customer's acts and reactions in the interaction that the salesperson seems to evaluate, as well as the salesperson's accounts from experience, give a good explanation as to what could make sales interactions valuable for the customer and thus what values are constructed in these interactions for both involved.

## Sales literature

The shortcoming of the sales literature in explaining value in sales interactions that I have identified and illustrated at the beginning of this work lies in its non-observance of the subjective, contextual and dynamic character of value. One of the reasons for this deficiency seems to be the tendency towards taking a static, one-directional salesperson perspective towards the concept of value creation, which is evidently problematic vis-à-vis an interpretive understanding of value. This study argues that the salesperson is ultimately dependent on the customer for any success in interaction, which is rarely considered in different sales approaches such as relationship selling (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Bradford et al., 2010; Davies, Ryals & Holt, 2010), adaptive selling (Weitz et al., 1986; Spiro & Weitz, 1990), customer-oriented selling (Schwepker Jr., 2003), solution selling (Sharma et al., 2008) or value-based selling (Töytäri et al., 2011; Terho et al., 2012). While these approaches consider the salesperson to adapt behaviors to a certain 'type' of customer or situation, they do not address the dynamic that lies in the outcome of the interaction being at variance with the salesperson's intention. And even if the salesperson has the characteristics and skill that are thought to make a successful salesperson (Franke & Park, 2006), the salesperson's acts are a result of the interaction just as much as they are the input to it.

Hence, this study integrates into the sales context the symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead, 1938; Blumer, 1969) and the shadowing techniques, which are not only rather unusual in this context but also contribute by presenting the *social and interactive nature of sales that has been called for* (Plouffe et al., 2008). Most sales research of the last decades has been found to either fall into the category of being atheoretical or into the field of psychology, and the hugely dominant research method is quantitative (Williams & Plouffe, 2007; Plouffe et al., 2008). This work is thus a part of a group of research that has recently started to extend the methodological and theoretical perspectives of traditional sales research (Guenzi et al., 2007; Liu & Comer, 2007; Plouffe & Barclay, 2007; Tuli et al., 2007; Flaherty & Pappas, 2009; Geiger & Finch, 2009; Lee & Cadogan, 2009; Corsaro & Snehota, 2011; Haas et al., 2012).

### *Social value constructs*

Most of the existing literature speaks of the salesperson as creating monetary value by finding a solution for the customer, which is improving the customer's business by gathering knowledge, doing creative thinking and integrating the resources (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Kaario et al., 2004; Anderson et al., 2007; Sharma et al., 2008; Töytäri et al., 2011; Terho et al., 2012). The assumption is thus that the salesperson has to create value and to communicate it for the customer to perceive it. However, that the customer might interpret something else as valuable is not taken into consideration. This study thus enriches the value discussion, which is considered to be in its infancy (Terho et al., 2012), by integrating the notion of value being interpretive, contextual and interactive. Hence, it *complements the customer value constructs of production efficiency and effectiveness* (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Anderson et al., 2007; Töytäri et al., 2011) with *non-economic*, or more specifically, *social value constructs* emerging from social and symbolic interaction. Examples of these are assurance, decreased risk, relief or reduced stress through support and decreased workload, which are idiosyncratic to each and every interaction as they are the result of an individual's interpretation of the interaction and the own situation.

While I discuss these non-economic or social value constructs as complementing and crucial for understanding business interactions, they are not or do not have to be unrelated to economic, or more specifically, monetary value. Some would argue that all these social values are essentially economic values in a context of a market where people make rational trade-off decisions. I have discussed these social values to come about in sales interactions where the individuals involved, and primarily the salesperson, want to make the interaction 'work out', that is, by making it valuable for the individual in relation to his or her personal situation. One could, however, certainly argue that *all these social values in a business context might influence monetary and ultimately financial value of the companies*. The work has shown that in some interactions the individual customer is willing to let the salesperson become more indispensable and the customer company more dependent. Supported by the salesperson's acts and reflections, the customer seems to 'reward' these social values with loyalty or a better price.

However, while the social values seem to influence monetary or financial ones for the salesperson or the supplier company, the *difficulty to 'put a price' on these social values remains*. While calculating a monetary value in the form of cost

savings is evident, translating a social value into a monetary one poses an obvious problem. It is less specific, difficult to measure, communicate and to compare thus even more ambiguous and determined by subjective dimensions. This leaves it up to an arguably opportunistic customer to acknowledge that the salesperson's flexibility and extra work effort makes their job easier and saves them time and energy, and to willingly pay more money. The work shows that the individual customer seems in fact willing to pay more, even if it might entail internal conflicts, for not missing what makes the interactions valuable for them personally. However, explicitly charging money for these values seems problematic. On a side note, monetary value is evidently no less a subjective perception; in fact if evaluations were not different between individuals it would be difficult for any exchange to come about. However, it is more likely to be influenced by a collective dimension as it is comparable and has an inter-subjectively, or socially established symbolic meaning.

Moreover, the study substantiates that salespeople evidently not only act so as to make the interactions valuable for the customer but also for him- or herself. It indicates that also the *salesperson value constructs* could be of a different nature than monetary. In some interactions the salesperson certainly seems to aim at getting a better price, thus a monetary value, for example, when the salesperson creates designs that provide a monetary value for the customer, which enables them to charge a higher price ('differentiating'). However, in the center of most interactions, which the salesperson seems to intend to make valuable primarily for him- or herself, are acts of maintaining a power position towards the customer ('defining customer problems', 'keeping up the helper image', 'differentiating') and of satisfying the customer ('providing for what the customer wants', 'looking after customer relationships'). This suggests, as discussed in Chapter 10, that what makes the sales interactions with the customer and internal colleagues valuable is that they create customer obligations, increase customer dependency and decrease own uncertainty towards internal colleagues. All these acts eventually secure the customer relationship from the salesperson's perspective or in other words they increase the *salesperson's feeling of security towards the customer*. In the internal interactions the salesperson's efforts to ensure customer satisfaction and to protect the customer indicate that what makes these interactions valuable is that they contribute to their *job security*.

### *Salesperson's role in creating value*

Throughout this work, the role of the individuals in evaluating and influencing the interactions for value to emerge has been highlighted. With that the study supports the claim for the salesperson's importance in business value creation (Sharma, 2007; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010) and also *enriches the understanding of the salesperson's role in value creation* (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010; Blocker et al., 2012; Bradford et al., 2010; Dixon & Tanner Jr., 2012; Haas et al., 2012). On a side note, this study illustrates what I consider a more balanced and realistic picture of practical sales reality that neither buys into the salesperson's manipulating power towards the native customer, nor into the constant reproduction of customer power and salesperson's dependency. Eventually, portraying this more balanced and realistic picture of this sophisticated profession might be one step in the direction of not only increasing academic interest in the field but also to deconstruct the bad image of the sales profession which inhibits academic interest and causes problems for businesses to find qualified applicants (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010).

The first theme (Chapter 6), that of 'providing for what the customer wants' might seem little surprising since much of what selling is understood to be about is to satisfy the customer's wants and needs. In these interactions the customer seems to be very specific or explicit about what he or she wants the salesperson to do. The customer-oriented selling approach conceptualized in a quantitative measurement scale for the salesperson's self-assessment contains the idea that salespeople should take the customer's interests first, work to achieve the customer's goal and aim to achieve the own goal by satisfying the customer (Saxe & Weitz, 1982; Schwepker Jr., 2003; Rozell et al., 2004). This approach has been developed to contrast the dominating notion of the 'hard sell' where selling was portrayed as acting only in the own interest of making most sales and turnover, manipulating and convincing the customer even if it might not be in his or her interest. Nevertheless, this theme *enriches the salesperson's value creation role in that it highlights that much of what is considered valuable for the customer by the salesperson and what seems to encourage positive reactions is not only about problem solving or solution creation*, as suggested by those approaches that dominate the discussion on value creation in sales (Rackham & De Vincentis, 1999; Sawhney, 2006; Anderson et al., 2007; Sharma, 2007; Tuli et al., 2007). While these approaches might address what creates the most obvious value for the supplier company as discussed above, they are not necessarily always taking



the individual customer into account. What is considered systemic value might not necessarily be 'valuable' for the individual customer, especially, when this individual customer raises a specific want in the interaction and has a goal that he or she wants to achieve with the help of the sales interaction. In fact, not pursuing this goal would probably be interpreted negatively by the customer. Finally, this theme pinpoints all the 'in-between' or *mundane interactions*, those that illustrate the many day-to-day interactions in sales that are not about problem solving or system improvement but *about the many things that salespeople can do to help individual customer contacts come closer to their personal goals in their work context*, which in its most evident form is to do a job that is perceived satisfactory by their managers.

The second theme (Chapter 7), that of 'improving customer situations', could be described as those interactions where customers have implicit needs rather than explicit ones (Rackham & De Vincentis, 1999). The customers seem less specific in formulating a want, so the salesperson's acts to improve the customer's situation are based on his or her interpretation. Customer improvement or problem solving are usually the concepts that are used to describe the salesperson's value creator role as mentioned above (e.g. Rackham & De Vincentis, 1999; Sawhney, 2006; Anderson et al., 2007). This theme, however, is different, as it focuses on the customer as a person and not a company. Thus the *salesperson can not only create value by improving business processes but also for the individual customer by either enabling him or her to cope with the own trouble*, sharing insights and providing him or her with the necessary tools or by *assuring the customer of the ability and willingness to help*. All these activities aim to influence the customer's perception of the own personal situation as being improved.

The third theme (Chapter 8), 'reducing customer workloads' suggests that there are also salesperson's attempts to make the interaction valuable for the customer that are not initiated by more or less explicit customer goals. The salesperson's activities in reducing the customer's workload seem to be partially embedded in work routines that have been proven to be appreciated by the customer and that the salesperson continues with or even tries to apply to other customer interactions. In these interactions the salesperson *provides day-to-day support to the customer to reduce their workload* in the assumption that making the customer's work life easier is valuable to them. Whether these activities are desired by the management or not, the study shows that salespeople consider

them as an important part of their work. Surprisingly, these salesperson activities are insufficiently represented in the traditional sales taxonomies (Marshall et al., 1999; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Singh & Koshy, 2010). The relationship selling or relationship management approach as well as the customer-oriented selling approach could have been suspected to address support activities, such as small favors, administrative work responsibilities or customer-internal stakeholder management discussed in this theme. While the latter does not seem to address these aspects of sales work, the former describes selling as cooperation, creating trust and building long-term relationships, but it does not elaborate on how the salesperson goes about it. The support activities depicted in this theme might build trust and certainly require trust from the customer's side, to let the salesperson play such a crucial role in the own business, but most importantly they seem to be evaluated positively by the customer during the interactions. Intriguing about these activities is that so far they neither seem to be discussed in the literature, nor *do they seem to be fitting the picture of 'professional' or 'complex' selling that is portrayed to be about problem solving or solution selling.*

The final theme, 'looking after customer relationships' (Chapter 9) has shown the interactions that salespeople have internally as part of their work, highlighting the challenges and how salespeople cope with them. The salesperson as boundary-spanner is an established image describing the salesperson as one who has to know the customer's wants and needs and match them with the company's resources. In non-standardized sales contexts this requires the salesperson even more so to connect between different links in the customer company, marketing, production, purchasing and different departments in the own company, internal sales, production and design as part of their work (Bradford et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2010). The internal interactions have a different logic with regard to the salesperson's value creation but are an evidently crucial part of the salesperson's work. The salesperson does not seem to have the same intention to make the interaction valuable for the internal colleagues as they have for the customer. Instead from the salesperson's perspective, the internal interactions appear to be perceived a 'necessary evil' for creating customer value. *The internal interactions are often marked by conflict since neither party is concerned with making the interaction valuable for the other,* but it is still a social interaction where mutual goal accomplishment is crucial for successful continuation.

Hence, in internal interactions salespeople are mostly concerned about making them valuable for themselves by *decreasing their own uncertainty* in the light of their dependency on the colleagues' work. Many of the activities that serve to decrease own uncertainty are preventative, where the salesperson establishes a way of working with the internal colleagues that leads to the intended outcome enabling him or her to provide the customer with the assumed wants ('specify customer insights', 'control is better'). By 'creating personal relationships' with the internal colleagues the salesperson creates an atmosphere of mutual favors and obligation and the colleagues will be more likely to be willing to do what the salesperson asks them, because they do it for someone they like. When involving them emotionally, the salesperson tries to bring the internal colleagues closer to the own position where they might be personally interested in a satisfied customer. Hence, it is not only a customer of the plant anymore but the colleagues have an interpersonal relationship and own involvement with this customer. Finally, in some situations the salespeople need to do repair work and try to protect the customer's from dissatisfied internal colleagues, so as to make sure that the internal colleagues do not put their customer relationships at risk.

Another way to look across all these themes that substantially enrich the knowledge on the salesperson's value creation role is to consider it *as consisting of many different roles* that the salesperson takes on as participant in social and symbolic interactions. Roles are an alternative to sales processes (Dubinsky, 1980; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) or taxonomies (McMurray, 1961; Moncrief, 1986; Marshall et al., 1999; Moncrief et al., 2006) that tend to portray a static picture of sales work. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, roles are established through interpretation of the other's acts that might signal, for example, expectations and self-reflection. Since the roles emerge from the interaction, they are not specific to the salesperson or customer, nor are they mutually exclusive. This work however suggests that some salespeople engage in some roles more often than others. The most dominant roles in this work have been the one of the expert (Liu et al., 2001; Anderson et al., 2007; Ingram et al., 2008) and that of the supporter or helper.

## Managerial Implications

At the beginning of this work I have promised that practitioners facing the everyday empirical reality will be better off after reading this in-depth insight into the day-to-day sales interactions in which salespeople attempt to create value. This work offers an alternative view to the one stating that value can be delivered to the customer by the supplier in form of a product or offering. By studying value as emerging from interpretive processes between individuals involved in interaction, it arguably provides a more nuanced and realistic understanding of how salespeople can influence sales interactions so as to make them valuable.

The four themes highlight that not all B2B sales interactions are about problem solving or solution provision and that salespeople attempt to make sales interactions valuable by other means than increasing system efficiency and effectiveness. This work has shown many examples of how salespeople influence the customer's problem definition and meanings of value. From a supplier company perspective the obvious question could be why any dimension of value, other than monetary, should be interesting, considering that this seems to be the strongest in enabling the company to realize their own value. However, this study shows that there are sales interactions that the individual customer seems to value related to their own situation. These bring about non-economic or social values that seem likely to influence the supplier's financial value in the long-run. Even though, these values are difficult to price, it is important to consider them as they are just as influential in shaping the perception of the individuals involved.

How can one manage salespeople or selling in the light of the argument that value is constructed in the interaction between those individuals involved? The symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that salespeople and sales interactions are difficult to manage. Managers can try to influence the salesperson's goals and intentions but eventually they determine their own directions that seem to make sense in the light of the specific customer interaction. In the following, *I propose less micro-management of selling in non-standardized markets*. The management task should rather lie in enabling the salesperson than in trying to make up for the physical distance and the difficulties in surveillance by prescribing salespeople how to sell. A company that

wants salespeople to create value in the interaction with the customer seems to require a longer-term perspective in the management of their salespeople.

Some challenges of managing non-standardized sales interactions became manifest throughout the company's change from packaging provider to solution seller. The company's dependency on individual salespeople conditioned by the knowledge that they build up through their frequent interactions with customers is one of them. This is not a new problem. Usually, however, it is considered to be a consequence of too personal relationships between customer and salesperson, and seen as less problematic for what is considered non-standardized, professional, complex selling, where several different contacts at customer and selling company are involved. Even though there are more individuals involved, salespeople still seem to keep their dominant broker position between individuals in the companies. As the present study has shown, salesperson's uncertainty is a crucial factor that plays into this decision, whether it is lack of trust in willingness or ability of the internal employees, the feeling of not knowing how to delegate the work or problematic relationships with the internal employees. Hence, this work draws attention to the conflict potential in the salesperson's internal interactions that is one potential area that managers could address in order to enable the salesperson to create value.

Secondly, the increasing importance of tacit and technical knowledge in non-standardized contexts has been substantiated in this work. Firstly, it points out the importance of experience in interacting with customers and interpreting or imagining what they seem to value. Secondly, the salesperson seems to need broader knowledge to work out interactions with many different contacts internally and at the customer. In order to understand their perspective, the salesperson needs to learn the language and terminology that these individuals use. The implications are that managers might want to consider whether the importance of the typical salesperson characteristics, such as extrovert, friendly, attractive appearance, etc. are still relevant in this context. Moreover, the profession of a salesperson in non-standardized B2B markets might be less suitable for an entry position. And finally, it seems more important that salespeople have the time to gain experience on the job than training soft skills or selling techniques.

Thirdly, the study has shown that for the support and help, which seems to be a great part of what salespeople do in their attempt to make the interaction

valuable for the customer, requires them to dedicate time. This highlights again the suggestion for managers not to micro-manage, as it seems important for salespeople to be flexible and available for the customer, hence to have the time to do the little bit of extra for the customer. A management that prescribes a certain number of customer visits per day or that controls the effectiveness of the meeting by the immediate outcome seems counterproductive. Especially since the attempts of salespeople to create value show many activities that go beyond what one might expect salespeople to do, time pressure might make things difficult for them.

## Limitations and Future Research Endeavors

As with every research endeavor this one has limitations some of which I want to discuss in order to point out potential future research paths. Symbolic interactionism provides a frame to focus on activities instead of types of salespeople since emotions, motives, symbols, objects, significant others and past experiences are all seen as embodied in people's activities (Charon, 2007). This way of turning people into activities or processes presets responses to particular situations or problems, relations between situations that have consistency and therefore permit theoretical generalization (Becker, 1998). However, as with every perspective, even the symbolic interactionist (SI) one is limited which has some effects on my research. While Charon (2007) puts forward constraints for the notion of the thinking, evaluating and planning individual, the underlying dominating assumption of SI is that the individual is genuinely active in thinking, defining situations and adapting lines of actions over and over again in each interaction. I consider it a suitable perspective for non-standardized B2B selling, as it is more prone to individuals using their tactics and moves to accomplish specific goals and intentions, than other social interactions for example between other colleagues or friends. Moreover, I have delimited this study from personal selling and more standardized business sales, where interactions seem to be shorter, more repetitive and salespeople might be likely to follow similar patterns and routines.

Nevertheless, the shortcoming in adopting the SI perspective lies in the non-observance of the non-conscious, habit or impulse acts. Especially, with more experienced salespeople it is likely that a great deal of their work, as for any other

profession, happens through recognition and habitual acts. Hence, by analyzing the interactions as conscious acts and reactions of influencing and adapting, there might be the danger of ‘over interpreting’ the interactions in the sense that the individuals are considered to act consciously while they might not. Instead they might be better described by the use of memorized jargons, copying of phrases or actions from one interaction to another. The technique of shadowing has enabled me to capture those mundane activities in sales interactions that both salespeople and customer might do on a daily basis. However, the SI perspective draws attention to the conscious and planned activities in the interpretation, analyzing goals and conscious role taking. Hence, it leaves out the focus on the pre-established nature of sales pitches and the roles of the salesperson and customer within them.

Hence, one research endeavor could be to focus on more standardized sales interactions where salespeople might be likely to engage in ‘mindless’ action of what is assumed to be valuable, given a comparative and repetitive context. One could ask if salesperson’s acts seem less thoughtful, more non-conscious in these sales interactions. And whether a collective or socialized dimension of value (Edvardsson, Tronvoll & Gruber, 2011) might play a greater role. Hence, what assumptions of value do the individuals bring into the interaction based on their social context?

Finally, I believe that the themes and processes in this work are relevant across different industries where there is a setting of non-standardized selling and existing relationships. However, value constructs that have been empirically relevant for distinguishing the themes might differ in other empirical contexts and hence enrich these findings. Future research could investigate whether different sources of uncertainty in other non-standardized market contexts would change salespeople’s ways in making sales interactions valuable. Additionally, the salesperson’s customer dependency conditioned through the empirical context of a buyer market has formed the empirical context of this work. The move towards solution selling has been for the paper packaging industry an attempt to make a margin and survive throughout the commoditization of the product. This dependency in the salesperson-customer relationship could certainly differ between industries potentially influence the salesperson’s attempts to make interactions valuable.

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# Appendix I - Summary Table of IMP & Service Logics on Value

Conceptualization of Value	Service Logic (Grönroos)	Service-dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch)	IMP Literature (Håkansson, Ford, etc.)
<b>Ontology</b>	Value is created <i>in interaction</i> (supplier-buyer) <sup>8</sup>	Value is created <i>in interaction</i> , jointly and reciprocally (supplier-buyer)	Value is created <i>in interaction</i> (actor-actor)
<b>Value definition</b>	Value-in-use: - <i>Technical dimension</i> (efficiency & effectiveness) - <i>Monetary dimension</i> (growth opportunity & cost saving) - <i>Perceptual dimension</i> (trust, commitment, comfort and attraction)	Value-in-use is phenomenologically perceived.	The value of an interaction episode for a particular actor is that actor's <i>perception/ interpretation</i> of the episode's contribution towards coping with its specific problems.
<b>Timing</b>	Value-in-use: customer value only when	Value-in-context: No value <i>until it is perceived/ experienced</i>	<i>All episodes</i> of business interactions have a

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<sup>8</sup> The shadowed areas show commonalities in the perspectives.

	<i>offering is used</i> (resources integrated into the customer business)	by the beneficiary (addition: does not necessarily need to be in use-situation)	particular meaning for those involved in contributing to the own problem solving
<b>Pers-pective (to whom, from whom)</b>	<i>Customer value:</i> customer is main value creator by integrating resources, supplier can be co-creator	Value is always co-created, <i>jointly and reciprocally</i> , in interactions among providers and beneficiaries, and perceived by the <i>beneficiary</i> .	Value for <i>both actors</i> : each actor is concerned with the value of each of those involved in interaction
<b>Value Creation</b>	<i>Resource integration</i> (seller into the customer practices and processes, customer into the own processes)	Mutual and reciprocal integration of resources and application of competences	Mutual and reciprocal <i>problem-solving</i>

# Appendix II - Salespeople's Background

Sales-person	Position	Background	Research
<b>Adam</b>	Key account manager for two major German FMCG companies (2 year & ½ year relationships)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 2002<sup>9</sup></li> <li>• 20 years in paper packaging industry</li> <li>• Internal sales</li> <li>• Project management</li> <li>• External sales (3 years)</li> </ul>	Germany, region South-East (3 days)
<b>Boris</b>	Account manager (geographic region, FMCGs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 2002</li> <li>• 25 years in paper packaging industry</li> <li>• Internal sales</li> <li>• Designer</li> <li>• External sales (10 years)</li> </ul>	Germany, region North (2 days)
<b>Christian</b>	Strategic account manager for four major German FMCGs (5-8 year relationships)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 2002</li> <li>• 25 years in paper packaging industry</li> <li>• Plant manager</li> <li>• External sales (25 years)</li> </ul>	Germany, region independent (2 days)
<b>David</b>	Strategic account manager for one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 2002</li> <li>• 18 years in paper packaging industry</li> </ul>	Germany, region independent

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<sup>9</sup> Acquisition of Stabernack by SCAP taking over most employees.

	global FMCG (8 year relationship)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal sales</li> <li>• Production</li> <li>• External sales (13 years)</li> </ul>	(2 days)
<b>Edward</b>	Account manager (geographic region, food & manufacturing industries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 years SCAP</li> <li>• Packaging mechanic</li> <li>• Designer</li> <li>• External sales (10 years)</li> </ul>	Germany, region North (4 days)
<b>Fred</b>	Account manager (geographic region, food & manufacturing industries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 years SCAP<sup>10</sup></li> <li>• External sales in paper packaging (15 years)</li> </ul>	Germany, region North (3 days)
<b>Oscar</b>	Account manager (geographic region, food & manufacturing industries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 1993</li> <li>• 30 years in paper packaging industry</li> <li>• External sales</li> </ul>	Germany, region South- East (2 days)
<b>George</b>	Key account manager (fruit & vegetable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 years in SCAP</li> <li>• 20 years paper packaging industry</li> <li>• Purchasing</li> <li>• Internal sales</li> <li>• External sales (15 years)</li> </ul>	Germany, region North (3 days)
<b>Hans</b>	Key account manager (international accounts, manufacturing industries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 1993</li> <li>• 25 years in paper packaging industry</li> <li>• Internal sales</li> <li>• External sales (15 years)</li> </ul>	Germany, region South- East (3 days)
<b>Jacob</b>	Account manager (geographic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 years in SCAP</li> <li>• 22 years paper packaging industry</li> </ul>	Germany, region North

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<sup>10</sup> Acquisition of Zewawell by SCAP taking over most employees.

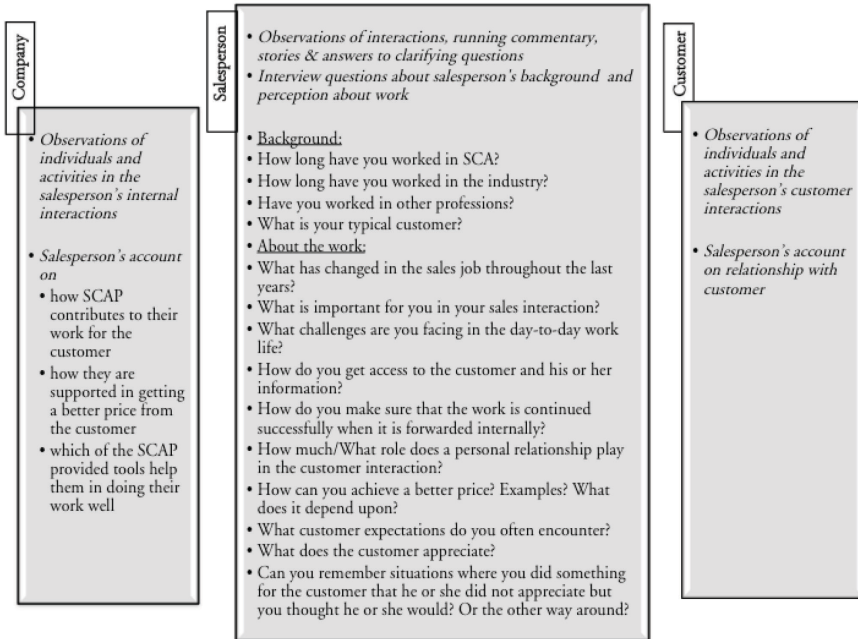
	region, food industry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External sales (32 years)</li> </ul>	(3 days)
<b>Karl</b>	Key account manager (FMCG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 2006<sup>11</sup></li> <li>• 25 years in paper packaging industry</li> <li>• Purchasing</li> <li>• External sales (20 years)</li> </ul>	Austria (2 days)
<b>Marcus</b>	Key account manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCAP since 2006</li> <li>• Designer</li> <li>• External sales (20 years)</li> </ul>	Austria (3 days)
<b>Nils</b>	Account manager (geographic region)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 months SCAP</li> <li>• 10 years paper packaging industry</li> <li>• Printing preparations</li> <li>• Designer</li> <li>• External sales (4 years)</li> </ul>	Austria (2 days)

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<sup>11</sup> Acquisition of Welpa by SCAP taking over most employees.



# Appendix III - Overview of Empirical Material



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