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Exploring Professional Sales and Marketing Identity In B2B Customer Value Creation

Keywords: business to business marketing, key account management, value oriented sales, professional identity, value propositions, value proposing actor

Abstract

This paper considers the role of professional identity in the creation of customer value in a business to business context. We find that the identities of sales and marketing professionals are more heterogeneous than the functional generalisations described in the literature as Sales and Marketing. Some identities are associated with value creation and other identities are associated with value destruction. Value creating professional identities are grounded in a strong sense of personal distinctiveness that is claimed by practitioners to generate worth and value to the customer through social and commercial competence, managerial expertise and wisdom.

Introduction

We are particularly interested in finding out and understanding the nature of professional sales and marketing practice and performativity in the context of value creation (Mason, Kjellberg and Hagberg 2015). To that end we are curious to learn more about the subjective dimensions of marketing work.

A range of identity profiles are proposed that characterise types of sales and marketing professional. These profiles are grounded in the explanations and sense making that professionals give about their practice. Two loosely related business to business cases are considered. Case one considers the identities of sales and marketing professionals and their engagement in value proposition creation. Case two is a supplier side account of key account managers and the professional identity they cultivate to convey their personal value to the customer. We tentatively propose an explanatory model of customer value creating professional identities which brings insights from the two cases together.

We follow Bagozzi (2006) who notes the fundamental significance of the individual actor in business to business interactions observing that buyers and sellers are more than mere automated script followers. It is suggested that using the lens of identity generates provoking and fruitful perspectives on customer value creation. This approach stands in contrast to the prevailing emphasis in academic marketing management research that leans towards positivistic objective managerial problem solving (Hackley 2003) and the academic hunt for objective definitions of customer value attributes (Johnston 2014, Kelly 2017). Marketing management scholars note that less attention has been given to the sales and marketing practitioner as a social actor (Svensson 2007). Our perspective is thus inherently subjective and concerned with understanding, interpreting and explaining the ways in which professional actors make a valued difference to customers through their practice. We find resonance with the insights of

MacDonald, Kleinaltenkamp, Wilson (2016) who note that the idea of customer value in business to business solutions is more complex than solely the pursuit of cost/price benefits and organisational benefit bundles. Indeed we are sensitive to the notions of the value proposing actor and the co-creation of value (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 2011) and therefore regard individual sales and marketing professionals as exemplifying these notions.

Literature

We consider and inter-relate three areas of literature by referring to the extant managerial literature of value in a business context, sales marketing and key account management as value proposing actors, and the sociological literature on Identity.

Value

In parallel to the work in the area of consumer value (Holbrook 1999), business to business sales and marketing scholars have acknowledged that the notion of value is a significant concept such that value is a cornerstone of the marketing discipline (Tzokas and Saren 1999:53, Anderson et al 2009, Tehro, Eggert, Ulaga, Haas, and Bohm, 2017). Indeed it was Woodruff (1997) who drew particular attention to the role of value in the pursuit of competitive advantage.

Value is nevertheless an ambiguous notion and considerable academic attention has been applied to identifying and explaining the attributes of value. A consistent output of business to business value research has been covered in the literature reviews of Walter Ritter Gemunden (2001), Lindgreen and Wynstra (2005) and Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant and Morgan (2012), Ellegaard, Medlin and Geersbro (2014). Furthermore scholars such as Khalifa (2004) and Menon, Homburg, Beutin (2005:2) have noted that an organization's ability to manage value drivers depends on achieving 'broad-based understanding of the value construct.' To that end a range of value types have been identified such as economic value (Porter 1985, Lapierre 1997, 2000), perceived value (Zeithaml 1988, Ulaga & Chacour 2001), relational value (Gronroos 1997, Payne and Holt 2001, Moller and Torronen 2003) co-created value (Vargo and Lusch 2004) and phenomenological and experiential value (Vargo & Lusch 2008, Helkkulah, Kelleher, Philstrom 2012). Furthermore analyses and syntheses of value attributes have also been produced and published in the practitioner literature (Kelly, Johnston and Danheiser 2017, Welch 2018, Almquist, Cleghorn and Sherer 2018).

The notion of value can be understood as a blend of objective and subjective dimensions whose worth is subjectively judged by the customer and not imposed on the customer by the supplier. This multifaceted and complex nature of value is noted by Brock and Colgate (2007) who draw attention to the idea that firms rarely offer just one type of value. The nature of value therefore remains ambiguous and as Gummerus claims little consensus exists due to the variety of value conceptualisations (Gummerus 2013:20). The dynamic and subjective nature of value is

underscored by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2011) who define it as a sort of moving target due to its idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual and meaning laden nature.

The role of financial and relational value attributes have been singled out as especially characteristic of the context of business marketing. Monetary aspects of value are deemed to be central to commercial decision making where value is linked to cost of ownership and impact on customer profit (Anderson, Jain, Chintagunta 1993 Anderson and Narus 1998, Neap and Celik 1999, Cannon and Homburg 2001, Macdonald 2018). Relational B2B value attributes have been categorised by scholars such as Ulaga (2003) and Parry, Rowley, and Jones (2002) whereby service support, knowledgeability of the supplier, problem solving, good communication are deemed important. Concern with supplier - buyer relationships has more recently evolved into a concern with the co-creation of value following the emergence of Service Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Scholars such as Cova and Salle (2008), Pekarrinen, Ojanen, and Keranen (2012) Jaakola and Hakanen (2013) and Gronroos and Voima (2013) have drawn particular attention to joint activities involving suppliers and customers aimed at contributing to the value that emerges for both parties.

Consequently considerable academic effort has been devoted to identification of predominantly objective value attributes from the customer's perspective however the interest in ideas such as relational and co-created value has introduced inter-social, subjective aspects of value and an increasing interest in the role of the professional in the creation of value during customer interactions. It is from this perspective that the significance of communication, dialogue and learning are introduced (Ballantyne 2004, Ballantyne and Varey 2006, 2006a, Ballantyne D., Frow P, Varey R.J, Payne A. 2011 and Gronroos 2012). Dialogical communication in the context of relational value creation is being 'open -ended, discovery orientated, mutually achievable and value creating'. Varey and Ballantyne (2006:16). From this point of view value is not in the object of consumption, but in the experience of consumption Frow and Payne (2007:91).

Value Proposing Actors

The notion of the value proposing actor (Vargo and Lusch 2011) enables an explicit concern with the human dimension of value in marketing management practice. It is recognised that the term can apply at different levels of analysis and thus might refer to organisations as a whole rather than individuals. Much research has been conducted into the traits of sales and marketing practitioners, such as good time management, resilience, buying context adaptability, customer orientation, relational competence and their technical skills of objection handling, persuasive communication and negotiating (Cardozo, Shipp and Roering 1987, Guenzi et al 2009, Durif, Geay and Graf 2013, Jobber and Lancaster 2014) however research into the sales and marketing professionals as social actors is much less in evidence (Davies and Ryals 2013)

In the context of business to business face to face interactions it is the roles of sales and key account management (KAM) that play a key part in proposing value to customers. KAM and roles referring to similar terms such as strategic account management (Guenzi, Georges and Pardo 2009) are deemed significant in the determining and creation of value in a B2B context (Reid and Plank, 2000, Homburg, Workman and Jensen 2002, Georges and Eggert 2003, Pardo et al 2006, Ulaga and Eggert 2006, Moller 2006) thus as Haas Snehotha and Corsaro (2012:97) argue anyone involved in interactions with customers has a:

‘more or less explicit role in producing value in business relationships with customers’.

In that sense anyone who undertakes boundary spanning activities between the customer and customer orientated colleagues can be understood as engaged in value creating interactions and therefore can be characterised as a value proposing actor. A contrast can therefore be made between the objective design and building of the managerial artefact labelled the value proposition and the social act of offering value which is value proposing.

Identity

Identity is considered here to be a subjective social phenomenon and not something that positivistic psychologists might characterise as the actor’s traits, attitudes and habits (Lawler 2014, Parker 2018). It is related to how people identify others through speech -acts (Althusser 1971/2006) one’s sense of self (Elliott 2013) and the impression that one ‘gives off’ in social situations (Goffman 1990). Identity relates to as much to who I am not as to who I am.

‘Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others’ (Weeks 1990, p.88)

A concern with actor identity moves attention away from the identification of objective value attributes of offers to customer towards what Burr (2003:109) regards as the nature of a ‘valued identity’ that originates from the ‘social realm’. Lawler (2014) remarks further that:

‘Identity works as an object in the social world to delineate both persons and types of persons and differentiate between them’

We propose that professional identity has a bearing on the value creating work sales and marketing professionals do with customers. Goffman (1990) suggests that our status in that social world is related to our desire to be taken seriously and what might be inferred as a desire to be valued. In that sense sales and marketing professionals seek to establish their eligibility and credibility such that they are regarded as a trusted experienced professional (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Identity can thus be understood in terms of the worth that someone has in the eyes of others and opens up the possibility that some people are deemed to have more value than others in business interactions.

Research Methodology and Methods

Relatively few studies have been undertaken that consider the phenomena of business to business supplier and customer interactions from a sociological perspective using interpretive research methods (Edvardsson, Tornvoll and Gruber 2012). To contribute to debates from this standpoint two independent qualitative case studies of business to business sales and marketing professional practice are considered. They are loosely connected by the context of business to business marketing and the phenomena of customer value creation and proposal of customer value. The consideration of two cases is expedient with the simple intention of providing examples of the role of professional identity in the field of business to business marketing customer value creation. The first case investigates the interplay of sales and marketing professionals engaging in the act of producing value propositions at the sales and marketing interface (Rouzies et al. 2005, p.115, Guenzi & Troilo 2007; Hughes et al. 2012), the second case is a supplier side account of senior key account managers (KAM's) involved in the act of proposing value to customers (Vargo and Lusch 2011). Both cases offer an explanation of what is going on during the creation of distinctive value for customers (Hakansson and Snehota 1995, Ford, Gadde, Hakansson, and Snehota 2003).

The sample frames for both studies consisted of senior sales and marketing professionals who were business owners, heads of department, vice presidents and chief operating officers with a sales and marketing background. Informants were recruited by convenience and used snowball recommendations. Their names and organisations were anonymised. The organisations they worked for ranged from SME's to global corporations and represented a diversity of industry sectors including IT Solutions, Telecoms, Gaming and Entertainment, Marketing Services, Industrial Fabrications, Office Design and Refurbishment, Paper and Board Supply and Industrial Static Fire Hazard Solutions. Across both studies transcripts of 37 depth interviews lasting typically fifty minutes were thematically analysed (Boyatzis 1998) making use of Nvivo 10 software and interpreted by a process of primary coding, pattern coding and thematic identification. The analytical approach was inductively grounded in the data however no claim is made that any grounded theory approach was strictly followed (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Corbin and Strauss 2008) particularly as both researchers take the position that all research is theory laden and the literature was reviewed in advance of going into the field (Sayer 2010)

Case 1 Sales and Marketing Identities

The key insight from this case was that a more heterogeneous rather than homogeneous picture of sales and marketing functions exists. The identity participants gave themselves and others relates to the part they played on the sales and marketing stage (Goffman 1990) in the act of producing value propositions.

Several aspects of sales and marketing identity emerged labelled as; proliferation, generic versus specific, central versus local, selling to customers or serving customers, inside out versus outside in. This proliferation of functional identities given by informants are summarised as follows:

Functional Marketing Identities	Functional Sales Identities
Brand Marketing	Account Management
Corporate Marketing	Specialist Sales
Field Marketing	Systems Engineer
Campaign Management	Solutions Architect
Segment Strategy	Business Development
Client Marketing	
Account Based Marketing	
Proposition Marketing	
Product Marketing	

Table 1: Proliferation of functional identities (Kelly 2017)

Functional marketing identity perspectives

Proliferation

To illustrate this sense of marketing identity proliferation Coleen, a Senior Director for Global Campaigns in a Global Telco described herself as:

"Responsible for putting together perpetual demand generation programmes and creating an integrated factory approach".

This identity restricted the part she played in value proposition creation and production to routinizing the already produced value proposition which she expressed as:

"I am not as close to sales in value proposition development. My role is to work with segment strategy teams, who create the value proposition."

From Coleen's perspective it appeared that sales were not engaged in value proposition creation or represented by proxy through segment strategy who represent one of some five marketing stakeholders in value proposition production when she remarked.

"Product marketing, brand marketing, product management, segment strategy, digital marketing, it's about five. I think those would have, not to say that other people don't influence it or have a perspective, but they're the ones that technically are paid to have some input."

This proliferation of marketing role identities and the part they play in value proposition creation is mirrored by Laura, a seasoned Senior Vice President of Sales in the same Global Telco who said:

"Today you have corporate marketing...corporate marketing is saying here's the position we want to play in the market, product are saying here's the feature functionality and why it should resonate with our customers, and then North American marketing is creating those value propositions. So where I also see sometimes where there's a disconnect is marketing is trying to solve for what all these other departments want and how to get the best value proposition"

Laura attributed this role identity proliferation in marketing to a shift in focus in value proposition production to the extent that it was more concerned with including different marketing functionaries, at the expense of sales and customers.

Generic versus specific marketing identities

The identity of marketing practitioners seems to be closely tied to whether they perceive themselves to be performing a generic or specific role. A specific marketing identity seems to have immediate commercial utility in the minds of marketers:

Anna, Marketing Director of Account Based Marketing at a Global IT Company said:

“Competition is a key part of the insight that we gather. And it’s very important. We’re not talking about general marketing but we’re talking about marketing around a specific opportunity. We need to understand the competitors’ position.”

Generic marketing seems to be talked about in a derogatory way whereas specific marketing is seen as directly benefiting value proposition production for a specific deal opportunity. From a sales perspective the absence of value in general marketing was highlighted by Laura:

"General marketing does not work well for me or my customers general marketing support, general value proposition, general account based marketing, where it’s not truly unique to that account."

A value proposition that is overly generic and does not connect with the customer results from lack of inclusion of sales professionals. Informants with a sales role believe generic marketing results in value propositions that are all about the selling organisation, where any reference to the value customers seek is missing. In the words of Jeff, Managing Director, Global Telco:

“So, our 'value proposition' did revert to we’ve got this many locations in so many countries, this many people, this many installations, this many... You know, it’s all very much about me and my company and general company credibility stuff, which I think goes so far in establishing some sort of trust but I think most customers would be sitting there thinking so what?”

Sales here see marketers who only provide generic marketing as not generating value. Marketers who see themselves as providing specific marketing to sales, such as account based marketers, identify themselves as virtuous and judge generic marketers pejoratively.

Central versus local marketing identities

The centralisation or localisation of marketing resource was a further dimension of marketing identity. Central marketing was talked of pejoratively and seen as linked to low levels of collaboration and poor reputation. Anna, Marketing Director, Account Based Marketing in Global IT Co. seems to directly correlate central resource with lack of collaboration with sales:

“Where collaboration doesn’t work is when you’ve got a centralised marketing department that never interacts with sales people.”

Norma, a Senior Marketer in a Global IT company with experience working in several large organisations, believes marketing set up as central function leads to conflict with sales.

“I think when you’re centralised and seen as a service they have the opportunity to beat you up all the time...Oh, you’re not delivering this or you haven’t delivered that, and we constantly have to justify our existence. But if you’re actually part of the team and part of the sector team, for example, you’re integral”

Being ‘beaten up’ in a central function contrasts with the camaraderie of being ‘part of the sector team’ and feeling part of the success of that team. The implication for value proposition production appears to be that a central marketing function leads to less collaboration with sales who consequently see you as someone who can’t provide you with value.

Selling to customers or serving customers

Marketers view people in "general sales roles" as driven just by selling, and somehow less worthy of being engaged in value proposition creation input than people in sales jobs who are motivated by what marketers deem to be higher callings, such as providing the customer a good solution. Saskia looked back on her days as a Director of Marketing at a Global Telco on differences in sales roles:

"I found that especially in the Global Telco scenario involving the sales engineer or the solution architect was really helpful because while they benefit from closing a sale, that’s not their primary motivation. They’re closer to the product and understand the product more than the general sales person does and so they’re more holistically an expert on both-sides, the customer side as well as the product side. So I found them really valuable."

Thus "general sales people" are driven by closing a sale unlike sales engineers who may be motivated by delivering a good solution design. Norma, a senior marketer in a Global IT company, also contrasts "Sales" with "Business Development" where the former is all about closing sales and the latter is about "setting the scene" with the customer. Saskia and Norma appear to be suggesting that there are a number of actors in sales who need to be considered for roles in value proposition production.

The identity of simply ‘sales’ was less of an issue to the sales respondents in comparison to marketing informants. Interestingly, from a value proposition standpoint observations were made about the ability of sales people: For example, Terry, Vice President of Sales at a Global Mobile company:

"Value propositions are really not easy in terms of do people understand the benefits. That’s probably the hardest part of this. Certainly a level of intellect and analytical capability that perhaps isn’t always a requirement in an average sales force. I think it’s still quite a rare skill in a way."

Terry makes the point that having the skill to produce value propositions is a lack in most average sales forces. This rare skill that Terry talks of is one he regards as central to how the identity of a sales person involved in value proposition production would be shaped.

Sales actors were much more likely to talk about skills and competencies required for developing value propositions at the SMI.

Inside out versus outside in identities

The inside-out or outside identity cast Product Marketers as being inside-out, producing value propositions and marketing collateral detailing product features that lacked a deep sense of customer value. Industry, sector or segment marketers were identified as outside-in where the customer was present and at the forefront of marketing. Greg, owner of a Sales and Marketing Consultancy and formerly the Vice President of Sales for a Global Telco sees Product Marketing as a very inside-out starting with the product and working outwards and simply there to launch the product.

“Product Marketing takes a very much an inside-out view of the world. You know, I’ve got some products or I’ve got a new thing in my portfolio, how can I present that to the customer in terms of benefits, and quite often that is very me too in terms of how they position and present that in the market.”

Jeff points out how a top down style drives product obsession rather than customer orientation:

“...sometimes what happens is the product marketers, the product buyers have built their products and so what they're interested in is, if you like, we've got a widget, this widget is brilliant. More customers must want it, please go and sell it to your customers.”

Outside -in typification also applies to the marketing organisation, as Kyle, a former Senior Vice President of Marketing, at a Global Telco points out:

“A lot of the time the marketing organisation is a more of a product-orientated organisation that's tasked with rolling out new products and not necessarily revenue goals this year.”

Terry observed that this results in the “Lowest common denominator” effect in product marketing:

“So I think there’s a lot of lowest common denominator in product marketing that says well, you know, it looks okay and it’s like that other product over there and we think that

other company are selling some of this, so let's launch it, rather than thinking about how to deliver superior value.”

There is a lack of any dialogue with sales or the customer in value proposition production in these examples. Sales practitioners portray the product marketer identity in a very pejorative light.

Similarly marketing practitioners who see themselves as real marketers seek to disassociate themselves from product marketing. Saskia, Owner of a Marketing Consultancy, and former Marketing Director of a Global Fintech company observes:

“Product marketing folks are not marketers. They are very rational and obviously experts and passionate about their product that they're managing, but they tend to fill marketing literature with jargon and features that are maybe not the most important thing to be talking to the customer about”

Marketing practitioners who cast themselves as 'real' marketers held sales and customer proximity in high regard and spoke pejoratively of 'marketing' actors, usually in the form of product marketers, who do not engage in dialogue with sales and customers. There seems to be congruence between sales and marketing practitioners where sales are looking for the anti-product marketer and 'real' marketing practitioners want to be seen to have that identity conferred upon them.

The degree of customer exposure by marketers played a central part in how they are perceived by sales people. Terry mentioned how sector marketers were "in the field" with his sales team and with regard to customer exposure commented:

“Industry marketing, for example, should be seeing quite a lot of customers and therefore they're getting a view of what customers are doing. And I think that has a value to the client and to the customers themselves.”

Terry goes on to mention customer workshops facilitated by the sector marketers which were all about understanding customer issues to try and determine what value they sought from his organisation. From a value proposition production standpoint there is clear engagement between marketing, sales, and the customer here. Seasoned Sales Vice President, Laura, bemoans the lack of exposure to customers that marketers have:

“Well because marketing does not sit in front of customers every day. Marketing takes marketing data, they take product data, they take a lot of data that is also extremely important in their marketplace, so they rely on analyst reports, they rely on what data

they can potentially buy ... so it's a bit removed from the actual day to day challenges that some of our customers have"

The implication for value proposition production is that value comes as the sanitised interpretation of analyst reports. This does seem to suggest, that marketers would have a more positive identity if they did see more customers. A further interesting observation can be made in relation to the fluidity of identity over the course of a career. Norma described her career as a marketing practitioner. She viewed herself pejoratively as someone who did "colouring in": and seems to identify herself with a role that didn't provide value to sales in the production of value propositions.

"I think many years ago I don't think we were aligned. I think we were seen as people that did pretty pictures, brochures, colouring in, advertising."

As her career evolved into a 'leadership position' she provided more value to sales, and the organisation What is interesting here is that she contrasted this with how she saw herself in her early career.

"So [I was] producing the assets for people to use....But as I've gone further through my career, I'm on leadership teams; I'm advising them about what they should be doing, what they shouldn't be doing; so therefore they see you as adding value to them rather than just someone who can book meetings, etcetera, etcetera, or get mouse mats, mugs and pens."

The different sales and marketing role identities that emerged are summarised as the following types:

Sales and Marketing Role Identities
Distant Deidre - sees herself as distant from sales occupying a 'factory' type role where no consultation with sales is required for VP production
Ivory Tower Ian - university educated. Develops 'value propositions' based entirely on desk research, not 'real world' interactions with sales or customers
Trench fighting Trevor - fighting alongside sales people. Engaged with customers and sales in producing value propositions. Usually in a role adjacent to sales e.g. industry marketing
Product pushing Pete - typically a product marketer. Viewed pejoratively by sales and 'real' marketers alike for always pushing product features.
Generic Geoff - produces generic marketing based on a surface level understanding of a market seen to be of little utility to sales.
Specific Sheila - produces value propositions very specific to individual customers or opportunities, viewed as highly relevant by sales people.

Table 2. Sales and marketing role identities of marketers (Kelly 2017)

Typically 'Specific Sheila' would be in a role like account based marketing or industry marketing working with sales to produce specific output for individual customers. This type of output is viewed as highly relevant by sales and gives marketers a positive self-identity. Where there is a greater distance between marketers and sales characters like 'Product Pushing Pete' who produce product centric output that is not conducive to effective value proposition development and production by sales.

Case 2 The Value Proposing Professional

Several salient professional identity themes emerged from interpretation of the accounts of key account managers when talking about their practice. These refer to how they construct an identity which they believe is of value to their customers. These aspects of identity are expressed in the form of ‘I am’ in relation to being; principled, not a salesperson, commercially minded and professional, a sector expert, socially skilled and a conversation builder.

These themes were deployed by the informants as rhetorical devices (Potter and Wetherill 1987) to construct a professional identity which they sincerely claimed showed a distinction between themselves (as good) and others (as less good) in terms of their personal value to the customer. In order to be ‘taken seriously’ informants used their identity to convey a sincere and honest performance and at the same time avoid any hint that they are being cynical and deceptive (Goffman 1990). This is epitomised by Eric who remarked:

“We have certain very strong client relationships where they will feel very comfortable picking up the phone knowing they’ll get an honest response. “

The pursuit of personal credibility is central. Informants implicitly recognised that proposing value is a performance where not only products and services were presented for consideration but also themselves and their ideas. In that sense they understood they always being assessed by the buyer in terms of their worthiness as a potential and on-going supplier.

Each of the professional identity themes will now be considered in turn.

Principled

The touchstone that underpins of every subsequent theme of identity is a set of pro-social values (politeness, honesty, trustworthiness, benevolence and prudence). These values are modelled throughout the whole of the customer interaction and are the essence or deeply held beliefs of the professional. In this way the professional gives the impression they are someone who is trustworthy and worth doing business with. Fred conveys this when he describes a customer interaction:

“So we call that the ‘Chris Tarrant Moment’ i.e. we don’t want to give you that, but we do listen we don’t immediately kind of jump in and say ‘you’re wrong’ because who are we to tell them?”

Fred demonstrates benevolence and honesty by wanting to do what is best for the customer. Benevolence is synonymous with helping. Using the term ‘helping’ keeps pricing and costs in the background and frames the professional as a person who is doing good. Victor talks about selling a piece of specialised safety equipment as:

“That’s all part of, yeah, helping somebody downsize the risk”

Similarly honesty is regarded as essential to developing trust (Stuart Verville and Taskin 2011) Eric gives this example of admitting a capability limitation (and thus apparent loss of a business opportunity for the supplier) to foster the impression of honesty.:

“I’m talking about a scenario, where a client is asking us to do something that generally sits outside of our scope. There may be an element within a project that is challenging ...however, are we the right people to be doing that from the client’s perspective?”

Politeness (Watts 1989, Culpeper 1996 Wiechecka 2013) is presented in a range of ways, from not pestering and pushing the customer into decisions they are not ready to make in the way Ian describes:

“...have some details on an e-mail so that he can review in his own time under his own steam without any pressure of searching questions”,

Prudence demonstrates to the customer that the supplier looks after customer’s business and money in the same way as their own. Ursula describes how she isn’t reckless with the customer’s budget when she says:

“I wouldn’t let a client say we have got this problem, we have got to do this and I’ve got ten thousand pounds to spend on it. Because if it genuinely wasn’t there and it was a waste of money then I would tell them that they shouldn’t waste their money.”

Not a salesperson

The identity of ‘not selling’ avoids being ‘hailed’ by the customer (Althusser 1971) with the pejorative identity of ‘the salesperson’. Selling is invariably portrayed by informants in pejorative terms. For Kevin selling is:

“Yeah I mean y’know, it is the double glazing erm approach isn’t it, really...”

The identity of salesperson possesses a raft of undesirable characteristics and informants drew attention to what they lack in terms of; maturity, sophistication, flexibility, values, commercial understanding, sector experience, long term perspective, specialised knowledge, and professionalism. Some illustrative examples of these lacks are expressed as follows:

Lack of sophistication:

“there were the sales reps, who... but it was mainly order taking, you know, it’s three months since you last order, are you ready for some more?” – Harry

Lack of consideration for others:

“you get people continually ringing up from publications trying to sell advertising space and they were not knowledgeable” – Alf

Lack of agency:

“new sales people they follow script they’re given a script, that’s what you say, that’s what you need to do” – Trevor

The ‘salesperson’ is identified as driven by a short term, self-serving mentality, without any sense of the ‘big commercial picture’ and a grasp of the financial implications for the customer. There is little sign of emotional intelligence and sensitivity to the workings of human nature with the ‘salesperson’ being someone who displays unswerving loyalty to ‘the sales script’ and a petulant questioning attitude. In this way the identity of ‘salesperson’ is as Lawler suggests are:

“held to lack everything perceived as value” (Lawler 2014:151).

Commercially minded and professional

Professionalism and experience is produced through a discourse of commercial realism. This means the professional actor avoids being exclusively associated with relational warmth factors alone and revealing naiveté concerning financial, organisational and business processes. Ian gives this sense of keeping an eye on commercial factors when he says:

“if there’s a potential of growing their own businesses together from that mutual objective then organisations are going to try and do what they can to help and make that happen within the realms of their own requirement or potential restrictions or margin expectations”

Professionalism is demonstrated by being focused, prepared and structured with an ability to deal with challenging situations as well as giving time and energy to the customer.

“I would feel a representative would probably want to finish at five o’clock and you couldn’t get them after that or they’d be off on holiday for two weeks and they pass the phone to someone else. If a business owner rings you up and says, well, we do this, that and the other, I think as a business owner myself, I’d feel like... you would feel that that

person may be like yourself and want to do that little bit more to gain your business.” - Trevor

Professionalism is ‘paying attention’ and ‘being on top of the job’. Un-professionalism is over promising, failing to deliver, appearing complacent and being badly prepared. Professionalism is further grounded in the idea of business ‘as if’ it has come from the school of hard knocks rather than a textbook understanding of the business. Kevin sums up the need to show specialised understanding when he emphasises the need for:

“having a good understanding not just of that organisation but of the market in general”.

Commercial experience frames the professional as a more senior and seasoned individual, someone who understands how a profitable business and organisation works. Alf gives this impression when he explains how he connects his company’s value proposition to the commercial needs of the customer:

“You bring the ability to talk about what stock levels might be for a two million pound business of that size, what the ratios that you’d look for between people and turnover and profitability, to understand the business case and be able to help with that, what the cash tied up in the business might be, what the return on the investment might be, how it could look if you agree to become a three million pound business and how we could help you to get there with our augmented offer”.

The whole statement is carefully crafted to construct an identity of seniority and gravitas through showing comfort and confidence in financial matters.

Sector expert

Being a sector expert shows specialised market or sector knowledge. This is evidenced through a grasp of sector nuances engagement in ‘industry speak’. Ursula gives this account of the food supply industry:

“So, you know, week by week you get changes in raw material prices and a new buyer will probably not accept that. But when you know how the pig industry works and how prices fluctuate and how the amount of meat available fluctuates, you know that when a supplier says to you the price has gone up this week full well that six weeks’ time the price will go down, because that’s how the market moves.”.

Socially skilled

Crafting a professional identity also makes use of general knowledge about social and cognitive psychology. This permits insightful explanations of human nature in a business context. By

showing social and emotional insights is a sophisticated a understanding of what makes people tick is given. Colin talks about his ability to read the other person:

“People read you as you’re reading them”.

Kevin talks of the ability to read social situations:

“Now it, if in that personality situation, he may also have to take the view, which I strongly advocate, is that for some reason, chemistry might not be right with him. If the marketing director is, is very dogmatic or whatever, he might be about being a superior and being in the situation with [name] who is simply a minion”.

Professionals come across as deeply interested in people

Conversation builder

Conversation shifts the meaning of communicative interaction from transmission of information to a mutual exploration of ideas. Engaging in dialogue demonstrates an ability to listen attentively and co-create value (Ballantyne et al 2011). Being identified as someone who simply ‘has a conversation’ means the supplier - buyer interaction is distinct from high pressure selling. Being conversational is a way of constructing an identity that is non-intrusive, non-threatening and signals learning rather than persuasion. For Alf dialogue constructs a very different interaction experience:

“It’s, let’s share this pad, and what if we did that, and it’s more side-to-side and not the... whereas prescriptive is more across the table and so you’d position yourself differently, your body language would be different, the language used would be different. It feels different. “.

Conversation signals the customer centricity of the professional. It helps establish customer priorities and values and encourages inclusion. The co-production of value is exemplified by David:

“I’ll have flipchart at the front of the room and I want people to tell me everything they want everything they’ve seen in the past, anything they like, I don’t like, all the things they’ve perhaps moaned about behind the scenes, I want t’ know all of that, all the bits they really like and then basically from that kinda like get them to draw we’ll get the whole thing to be drawn by your people what they want.”.

The impression given here is akin to a teacher / facilitator rather than someone attempting to close a sale.

Sales and marketing professionals seem to purposively construct an idealised positive identity for themselves. This means that the idea of identity is significant because it immediately infers a sense of value. The personal impressions in business interactions here is distinct from the idea of 'personal appearance and characteristics' such as proper attire and promptness (cf Henthorne, laTour, Williams 1992 Evans et al 2000) and connects with the suggestion of Gronroos (2009) that proposing value is a promissory act that needs to convey a facilitative rather than a persuasive impression.

Conclusion

There are many identities at play in the professional work of sales and marketing. The idea of the dyadic sales-marketing relationship seen in the extant literature appears to be naïve and possibly redundant. Identity plays a key role in proposing value. Identities are associated with both value creation and value destruction.

We tentatively propose an integrated explanatory model of the themes and insights from this discussion as follows:

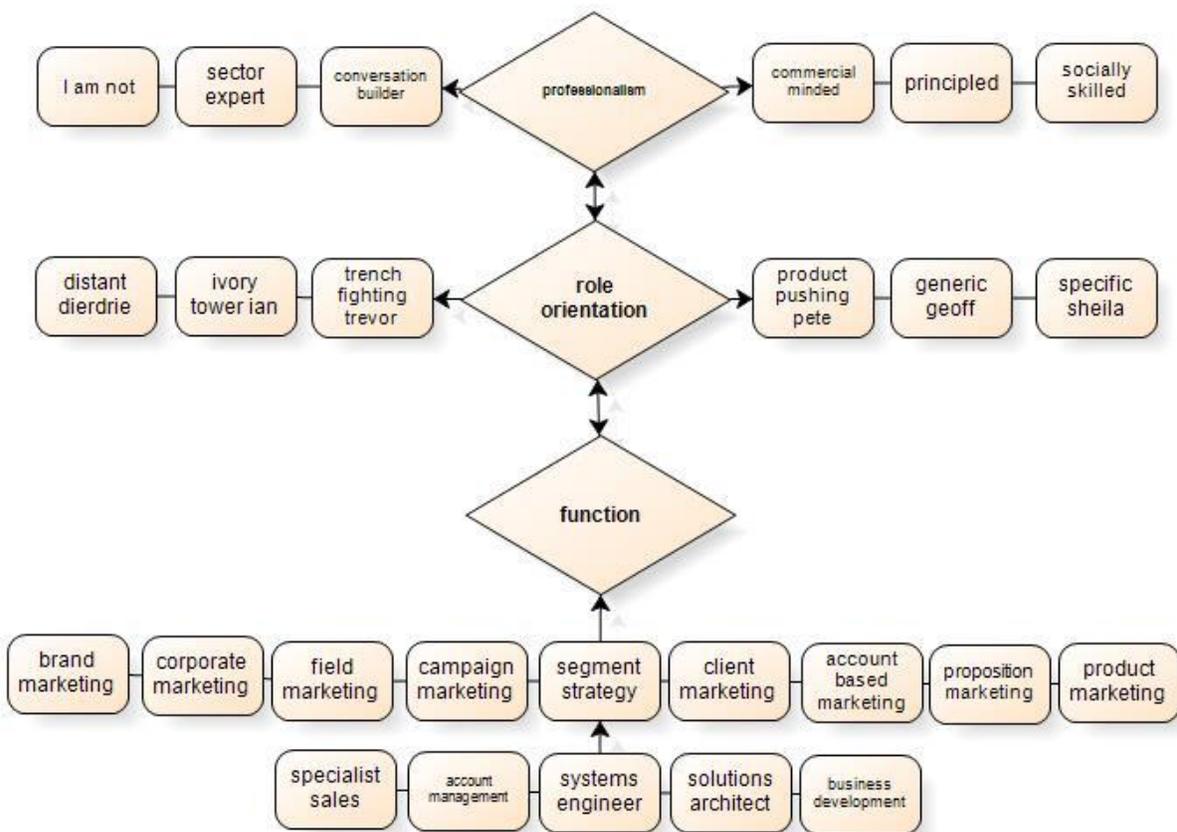


Fig 1 Professional Sales and Marketing Identity In B2B Customer Value Creation (Johnston and Kelly 2018)

The model above sets out an interpretation of a variety of professional sales and marketing identities from two case studies. An attempt is made to show different levels of abstraction with functional identity being foundational and role and professional identity being located at

increasingly higher levels of abstraction. In this way any sales and marketing professional can be thought of as being a blend of organisational identity, role identity and professional identity. This blend may constitute positive and negative aspects of identity in terms of value creation. The idiosyncratic and unique identity combination of any individual will thus have a bearing on their value creating competence and as such a positive value creating identity will not be uniformly be available to everyone. We suggest this might offer part of the explanation for the way in which sales and marketing professionals differentiate themselves in terms of the part they play in creating customer value.

Implications for Practice

It is proposed this paper presents implications for business to business sales and marketing management, employee selection and development, successful customer interaction and deal making, and effective value proposition production.

Our findings ask ‘Is it possible to select for value creating competence?’ It seems a complex of value creating abilities is useful and goes beyond mere the technical skills of selling, marketing and management.

Given the tribal nature of sales and marketing what competencies are required to bring the relevant professionals together in a timely manner to produce an create effective value propositions? Might this be a set of orchestration skills? (Lindgreen et al. 2012).

A question is posed in relation outside-in and inside-out marketing. How can these orientations be diagnosed and what are the implications for organisational design and employee development?

Failure to recognise the complex and tribal nature of sales and marketing organisation will tend to inhibit the creation of customer value and the production of relevant value propositions.

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