
Guest editorial

The sales ecosystem – defining and exploring how various levels of connection and interaction affect the selling process

Welcome to this special issue of the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* on “The Sales Ecosystem – Defining and Exploring How Various Levels of Connection and Interaction Affect the Selling Process.” The theme was inspired by research presented at the 2019 *Global Sales Science Institute Conference* held in Panama City, Panama.

The sales ecosystem represents the interactions between actors that take place within the sales process. These interactions can include, but are not limited to, exchanges between sales representatives and customers, relations between customers and other sales organization members, as well as the effects of environmental factors on these interactions and the sales process. The level and characteristics of these exchanges within the sales ecosystem can simplify or obstruct collaboration within and between organizations, create new business opportunities, affect technology innovation and adoption and transform buying and selling processes. Consequently, the study of these issues can add great value to both the sales literature and practitioners.

Using the ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a metaphor, the articles in the current issue draw from the interaction and connections that occur within or between one of three levels within the sales ecosystem:

- 1 *micro-systems*, i.e. the interaction of direct contact or bidirectional relationships, such as the interaction between a sales representative and sales manager or between sales representatives and customers;
- 2 *meso-systems*, i.e. the interaction between micro-systems or multidirectional relationships, such as the interaction between a customer and other people in the selling organization; and
- 3 *macro-systems*, i.e. the connection with macro-environmental elements that may affect sales, such as the government, the economy and culture (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Each of the papers in this special issue addresses one or more of these three elements related to the sales ecosystem. In the following sections, we provide an overview of each paper in our special issue, organized by ecosystem. The first section reviews articles exploring both meso-systems and micro-systems by examining the collaboration between sales and marketing departments and value co-creation. The second section provides an overview of articles investigating the

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effects of macro-systems on meso-systems with a special focus on technology. Our third section focuses on articles related to micro-systems, namely, the individual actors in the sales ecosystem. We end with a set of concluding remarks.

Examining meso-systems and micro-systems: the sales-marketing interface and value co-creation the sales ecosystem

Meso-systems include interactions between micro-system elements. In the first paper of this special issue, “Tensions within the sales ecosystem: A multi-level examination of the sales-marketing interface,” authors Malshe and Krush investigate the meso-level of the sales ecosystem by examining the intraorganizational tensions that arise during interactions between sales and marketing departments. Using a qualitative approach, the authors examine tensions, as well as mechanisms for managing these tensions, at three hierarchical levels within the organization: senior executives, middle managers and frontline personnel. The results shed interesting insights on the perception-based tensions that arise during interactions between sales and marketing and reveals that each organizational level experiences unique tensions and tension-triggering events that require distinct solutions.

The second paper, “Value (co-) creation in B2B sales ecosystems” places a focus on micro-systems and meso-systems by studying the value created within the buyer–seller interaction, with a specific emphasis on digitalization. Authors Rustholkarhu, Hautamäki and Aarikka-Stenroos use anecdotal evidence to make the argument that the identification of buyers and sellers as individual actors fails to recognize the complexities in the interactions between buying and selling firms. Instead, the authors conceptualize value co-creation as including the integration of value proposition creation and value idea emergence from both the buyer and seller perspectives. From this perspective, value co-creation becomes the responsibility of the multitude of participants engaged in the buyer–seller interaction. Because many interactions during this process take place digitally, the authors propose that digitalization shapes the process.

Exploring the effects of macro-systems on meso-systems: technology in the sales ecosystem

Macro-systems include environmental elements that may affect the selling process, and three of the papers in this special issue address this component of the sales ecosystem and its effects on elements of the meso-system. In “Digital transformation in sales as an evolving process,” authors Wenglar, Hildmann and Vossebein use data collected from 90 key informants to develop a conceptual framework designed to help practitioners identify the focal management areas for digital transformation in sales processes. In developing their framework, the authors strive to identify:

- the roles responsible for the digital transformation in sales;
- major drivers and barriers; and
- whether a company has the knowledge base needed to drive success.

The resulting framework captures companies’ internal and external digital transformation processes in sales.

Our fourth paper takes a slightly different approach in examining the sales macro-system. In “Sales technology and

salespeople's ambidexterity: An ecosystems approach," authors Giovannetti, Cardinali and Sharma examine salespeople's goal orientations and self-regulatory modes on performance through sales ambidexterity (an orientation that motivates salesperson customer service, cross-selling and upselling behaviors) and sales technology infusion (a salesperson's efforts to use sales technology to its fullest potential). The authors present the sales technology ecosystem as a set of multiple-related technologies that work with a focal technology, such as a CRM system. Using data collected via depth interviews, the authors identify technology orientations ("tech skeptics" or "tech enthusiasts") and posit that the use of technology in the sales process is linked to salespeople's technology orientations and ambidexterity.

The fifth paper in this special issue, "The utilization of online sales forums by salespeople as a meso-system for enhancing sales activity knowledge," takes a novel approach by using a netnography methodology. Specifically, authors Conde, Prybutok and Sumlin use an online discussion forum to examine interactions between inside sales agents. These agents use the online discussion forum to create what the authors call a community of practice, a forum for these agents to improve their sales knowledge and skills. Drawing from situated learning theory, the authors present rich insights from these online conversations and argue that organizations can use such communities of practice as supplemental training for inside sales representatives.

Micro-systems: individual actors in the sales ecosystem

The last set of papers in this first Global Sales Science Institute (GSSI)-inspired special issue place greater focus on the sales micro-system. In "Selling actors in multi-actor sales ecosystems: Who they are, what they do, and why it matters," authors Weretecki, Greve and Henseler argue that selling actors, i.e. the multiple actors involved in value co-creation in the sales process, is affecting the sales role, and to understand these effects, we must understand the different selling actors. The authors introduce an innovative qualitative, method, the "World Café," to identify eight different types of selling actors: avoiders, observers, receptive actors, preppers, expecters, savvy actors, challengers and coworkers. Using the World Café approach, the authors investigate the participation behaviors of these different selling actors from the salesperson's perspective.

The seventh paper in this series, "An ecosystems analysis of how sales managers develop salespeople," focuses on sales managers' leadership behaviors and the effects of these leadership behaviors on salesperson development within the context of the sales ecosystem. Using data gathered from qualitative depth interviews, authors Peesker, Ryals, Rich and Davis identify four key sales manager leadership behaviors relevant to the sales ecosystem: coaching, customer engaging, collaborating and championing. Further, the interviews revealed four relational elements coexisting with the leadership behaviors: trust, confidence, optimism and resilience. These findings provide organizations with a structure to guide training for sales managers, thereby reinforcing the sales ecosystem.

In our final paper, "Emotional labor in a sales ecosystem: a salesperson-customer interaction framework," author Klein sets the goal of developing an integrative definition of emotional labor, i.e. the management of emotions during customer interactions. Klein conducts an intense review of the literature to identify key ideas related to emotional labor and maps critical research themes. He argues that emotional labor involves a bidirectional interaction with customers at multiple levels. Ultimately, Klein models the salesperson-customer interaction using a bidirectional relationship approach.

Concluding remarks

The GSSI represents a global network of academics and practitioners involved in the study and performance of sales and sales management in a business-to-business environment, with the goal of bringing together international experts to advance the research of sales and sales management best practices and teaching. Each year the organization hosts a conference in a different part of the world to engage in discussions of sales scholarship and education. These conferences provide opportunities for in-depth discussions of sales research and facilitate networking, knowledge dissemination and brainstorming of new research ideas between sales scholars.

GSSI is a special organization comprising a diverse group of members devoted to sales research. We are honored to edit this inaugural special issue of *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* inspired by the GSSI 2019 Conference theme, and we are grateful to the editorial team at the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, especially Wesley Johnston, for providing GSSI members and sales researchers with this tremendous opportunity. Working with this team of authors has been both rewarding and enjoyable. We hope this issue spurs the continuation of sales research across the globe, particularly as it relates to the sales ecosystem. This ecosystem perspective in sales and its influence on multiple organizational levels underscores the importance of the goals of the GSSI and the need to improve our understanding of the sales organization as it relates to the overall business.

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