

The importance of value communication and work experience in sales during the COVID crises on the Austrian Medical-Device Market

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Abstract:

The COVID crisis influenced the communication approach of B2B companies substantially. Contact restrictions caused a massive reduction of personal meetings from members of a buying unit with sales representatives. This situation was even more challenging for companies in the medical-device industry. Customers in this market area established more strict contact restrictions. The objective of this paper is to investigate the impact of work experiences from sales reps on success. Additionally, it deals with the impact of this variable on the presentation of value during the pandemic. Results of a survey among sales representatives reveal, that the COVID crises impacts the perceived performance negatively, even though if the market volume was rising at this time. Additionally, the extent of work experience does not correlate with the level of success. Sales representatives with less than 10 years of experience report a higher level of success during the crises. They also used operational value dimensions for the establishment of value propositions more often. The study also reveals the absence of a correlation from the usage of these value dimensions with success.

Key Words:

Sales Management, Personal Selling, Value-Proposition,

1. Introduction and problem description

The COVID crisis substantially changed sales activities in various markets within a very short period of time in 2020. The first COVID infection in Austria was reported on the 25th February (Arora, & Schüller, 2021), and subsequently the World Health Organisation classified the outbreak of this virus as a pandemic on 11th March. In Austria, the first lockdown started on 16th March, when the Austrian government restricted the mobility of citizens dramatically from one day to the next, whereby concrete reasons for leaving homes were specified. This influenced the private and the job-related situations of people, and companies were forced to change their working model to home office wherever possible (Arora, & Schüller, 2021).

These contact restrictions had a substantial impact on selling organisations of companies. Ray et al. (2020) report that customers in business-to-business (B2B) market segments switched their information and communication approaches with market intermediates and potential vendors immediately. Rangarajan et al. (2021) report a massive reduction of personal meetings from members of a buying unit with sales. The consequence of this development was a rise in

the usage of digital service tools like e-commerce platforms. Information about necessary products and services was almost entirely completely collected online. This situation was especially challenging for the majority of companies that are acting in B2B markets. Compared with companies primarily acting in business-to-customer (B2C) market segments, their business and communication processes have a relative low level of digitalisation (Guenzi, 2020).

Therefore, a majority of companies in B2B market segments were forced to completely change their communication patterns. A fast enhancement of the online presence (e.g. through online information platforms and personal digital meetings) helped them to manage business during COVID (Donchak et al., 2022) Ultimately, it can be concluded that the pandemic was a mediator of a further digitalisation of selling processes (Hadjikhani & Lindh, 2020).

This situation was even more challenging for companies in the healthcare sector, whose customers established more strict contact restrictions. During the COVID crisis, it was very difficult for sales representatives in the pharmaceutical and medical device area to schedule face-to-face meetings with representatives of health care institutions in Austria (Phillips, 2020) Personal meetings were mostly cancelled or replaced with virtual conversations. Ryan (2020) even reports a reduced willingness of medical personnel to meet representatives from pharma or medical device companies during the first year of the pandemic.

A closer look at the general market dynamics illustrates the challenges for selling departments in this industry. The medical device sector is described as a very complex market environment (Denis et al., 2007). Altenstetter (2003) reports an intensive level of competition and a high number of small and medium-sized companies (SME). MedTech Europe (2020) sees an innovative nature due to a large number of patents. Additionally, the market comprises B2B and business-to-governmental (B2G) market segments. The majority of Austrian healthcare institutions are financed through the public sector (Hofmarcher, 2013).

This paper takes into consideration the unique characteristics of the medical device market and the challenges for selling entities, which were accelerated through the COVID crisis. It investigates how sales representatives handled this uncertain and challenging situation during the pandemic. The objective of this paper is to investigate whether work experiences helped sales representatives in this market area to manage this uncertain situation. Additionally, it deals with the impact of work experience in terms of how value propositions for medical devices were communicated in the presentation phase of a selling process value. The establishment of four hypotheses ensures the focus on the aforementioned objectives.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The objective of the paper requires an understanding of the impact of work experience on success in personal selling in B2B market segments. Therefore, this impact is discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Subsequently, this chapter includes an overview of the further development of B2B selling practices in recent decades. This evolution is elaborated with a visualisation of a conventional selling process. A special focus is set on the presentation phase of this model. The communication of the individual value of a solution for customers is an essential element of this phase. Additionally, the concept of customer value in a B2B context is discussed at the end of this chapter.

The impact of demographic variables such as age and work experience on the level of success of sales representatives is a research path in sales since decades. Results indicate that the extent of work experience influences the success of sales representatives. Experienced company representative benefit from their knowledge about how challenging situations were handled in the past, whereby this experience is used for developing solutions to new challenges (Franke &

Park, 2006).). Ultimately, work experience enhances the versatility and adaptability of future selling tactics (Weitz et al, 1986). Additionally, it broadens the level of knowledge about the markets. This aspect includes the extent of knowledge related to products from one's own company and competitors, challenges for customers, market trends and the impact of environmental factors (Giacobbe et al., 2006; Kienzler et al., 2018).

Investigating the impact from a completely changing market environment might affect the positive influence of work experience on sales success. Although the academic literature sees a positive impact of work experience on the performance of sales personnel (e.g. Franke & Park, 2006; Weitz et al., 1986) the authors do not expect a positive influence of work experience on the perceived individual performance. Therefore, hypothesis one is formulated as follows.

H1: The extent of work experience does not influence the perceived level of performance of sales representatives in the medical device sector during the COVID crisis.

The challenges on the medical device market and the pandemic – which are described by Donchak et al. (2022), Philipps (2020) and Ryan(2020) – lead to the expectation that the COVID crisis negatively influenced the perceived level of performance of sales representatives. Therefore, hypothesis two is formulated as follows:

H2: The COVID crisis had a negative impact on the perceived performance of sales representatives in the medical device sector.

Changing market dynamics and environmental factors have had a tremendous impact on selling process in recent decades. One of the first descriptions of a selling process was established more than 30 years ago. Dubinsky (1981) split a selling process into seven different steps: (1) prospecting, (2) pre-approach, (3) approach, (4) presentation, (5) overcoming objections, (6) close, and (7) follow-up. Key elements of this process description remain valid even though if practices have changed. Moncrief & Marshall (2004) added a focus on B2B markets to this basic model. Additionally, adoptions were needed due to a further digitalisation of business processes and the increased complexity of the market environment, which affects especially step (1) and (2) of the selling process. The importance of including online communication and CRM databases in the execution of these steps is described. Additionally, an increasing complexity of decision-making processes in organisational buying requires a stronger focus on developing trust with various members of the buying unit in the approach phase (3) of the selling process. The most substantial changes are described in the presentation phase (4). An increasing demand for customised solutions can be seen as a driver of the need to develop a more customised value proposition (Steinhoff et al., 2019). A rising number of services in the B2B sector increases the need for holistic communication of the value from an offering (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). The presentation of an offering has to be based on the individual situation and potential problems of the customer. This requires the establishment and presentation of an individual value proposition for different members of a buying centre and different customer organisations (Salem Khalifa, 2004). An in-depth analysis of the customer situation and a tailored presentation are the basis for overcoming objections (5). An understanding of the impact of an offering (e.g. by estimating the ROI of an investment) supports selling organisations to close a deal (6). Finally, the follow-up at the end of the selling process (7) is needed to establish a long term-relationship with the customer (Moncrief & Marshall, 2004).

Disruptive changes to the business environment caused by the COVID pandemic require a further development of the selling process. Based on the selling process of Dubinsky (1981), Rangarajan et al. (2021) specified practices that are required to manage the COVID crisis.

Rangarajan et al. (2021) describe that basic challenges in the presentation phase still exist, such as the need for more versatile communication with B2B customers (see figure 1). They recommend creating persona-driven content throughout the process.

The contact restrictions during the pandemic also required communicating a value proposition in the online environment, whereby software like Google Docs can be used to co-create content with potential customers.

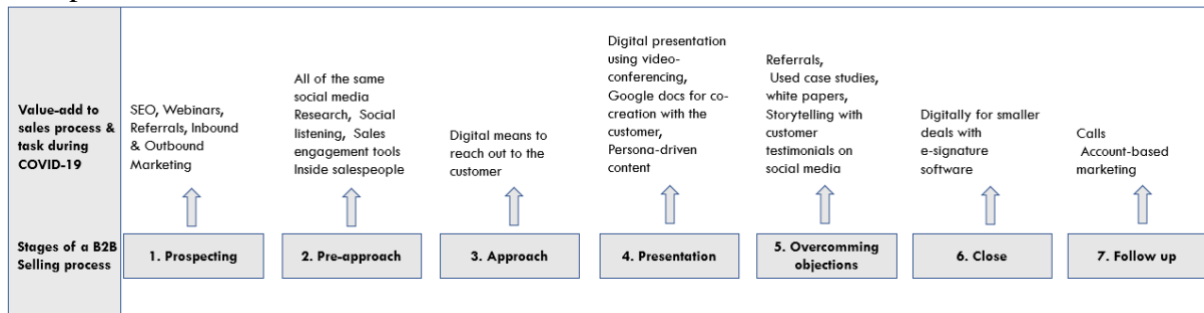


Figure 1: Stages of a selling process and required selling practices during the COVID crises (adopted from Rangarajan et al., 2021)

Based on the previously-described evolution of the selling process, the increasing complexity of the market environment and changing decision-making process in organisation, it can be concluded that the presentation of an excellent value proposition is a central success factor in B2B market segments. This requires an understanding of the concept of value. The academic literature in the area of personal selling distinguishes between a vendor, customer and dyadic perspective of value (Terho et al., 2012). The most relevant perspective in a presentation phase of a selling process is the customer perspective on value. Töytäri et al. (2011) define customer value as “the difference between the customer’s desired value and the customer’s total cost of ownership.”

Various scholars specify the customer perspective on value. Therefore, a distinction can be made between different dimensions of value that can be perceived by customers. In a B2B context, Graf and Maas (2008) and Hinterhuber (2017) distinguish between two-dimensional value concepts, namely qualitative vs. quantitative, and product- or service-oriented value.

Töytäri et al., (2015) visualise the versatility of the value concept in a B2B context through the definition of four value dimensions. The offering (product or service) of a vendor may deliver an operational value dimension for the customer when internal business processes are positively influenced. This can be achieved through the reduction of costs or an enhancement of the output. A strategic value can be created through a positive impact of a vendor’s product (service) on current organisational capabilities of a customer. Examples include the transfer of product related know-how, market knowledge or enhancement of the innovation power. The social value dimension includes an impact from an offering on the status of a customer company in the society. An example is a positive impact on the brand or the positioning of the company, which might positively influence the acquisition of new customers, or the price level on the market. The symbolic dimension summarises a positive impact of a vendors offering on employees from the customer organisation. Examples include a positive impact on the motivation level of employees, the productivity level or a reduction of the employee turnover rate. Independent from a versatile view on value, operational value dimensions are seen as the most central elements of a value proposition. Different views in a buying centre on operational dimensions have to be taken into consideration based on the versatile and subjective nature of value (Wind & Webster, 1972; Töytäri et al., 2011).

Based on the general importance of operational value dimensions (Töytäri et al., 2011), a broad understanding of challenges from customers (Kienzler et al., 2018) and extensive knowledge about products (Giacobbe et al., 2006), hypothesis three expects a correlation between the work experience of sales representatives and the perceived importance of operational value dimensions in the presentation phase of a selling process. In this context, hypothesis four expects a correlation between the usage of operational value dimension in product presentations and the success of sales representatives in the medical device sector.

H3: The higher the work experience of a sales representative, the more strongly they perceive the importance of operational value dimensions in the presentation phase of a selling process.

H4: There is a correlation between the perceived importance of operational value dimensions and the perceived performance of sales representatives.

3. Methodology

In 2021, data for answering the previous stated hypothesis was collected in the context of a holistic research related to selling activities in the medical device industry in Austria. This project included the collection of qualitative data through in-depth interviews and quantitative data through distributing an online survey.

The quantitative online questionnaire was distributed via convenience and snowball sampling. Overall, 86 companies acting in the medical device sector were contacted. These companies were listed on the website of the advocacy organisation of this market area (AUSTROMED, 2021). After the initial contact, representatives of each company distributed the questionnaire among their colleagues in sales and sales-related positions (e.g. market management, product management, business development). A screening question related to the extent of work ensures that all participants of the survey have had experience in sales or sales-related positions. Overall, the results of 113 questionnaires form the basis of the statistical analysis. A scale from Homburg et al. (2011) builds the basis for the measurement of success of individual sales representatives. It includes the items sales volume, contribution margin, achievement of pre-defined sales targets and market share. Respondents rated their level of success prior to and during the COVID crisis (until September 2021). A seven-point scale ($-3 = \text{“much worse”}$ and $+3 = \text{“much better.”}$) was used for these items.

An analysis of the academic literature leads to the conclusion that no scale exists for investigating the importance of operational value dimensions in the medical device sector. Ten in-depth interviews with experts in the Austrian medical device market revealed potential operational value arguments for medical devices. Respondents from the expert interviews were selected through purpose sampling. All experts had at least seven years of work experience in sales or sales-related jobs in the medical device market. Operative value dimensions for different members of a buying unit were identified through a qualitative content analysis of the qualitative interviews. The importance of identified operative value arguments was evaluated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not important; 7 = very important) in the quantitative questionnaire. These items of the questionnaire were pre-tested prior to the distribution of the questionnaire.

Operational value arguments were clustered into the following categories:

- Improvement of procurement processes which are important for buyer of a decision making unit (cluster 1). Items: Assured availability of products, Fixed delivery dates of products

- Improvement of the handling of medical devices which are important for user of a decision-making unit (cluster 2). Items: Straightforward handling of products, High reliability of products, Reduction of potential handling errors, Reduction of the length of clinical processes, Reduction of infections in healthcare institutions.
- Advice from vendors to optimise internal processes of healthcare institutions which are important for influencer of a buying unit (customer 3). Items: Support customers in the optimization of internal processes

The conceptual framework of this scholar is summarized in figure 2.

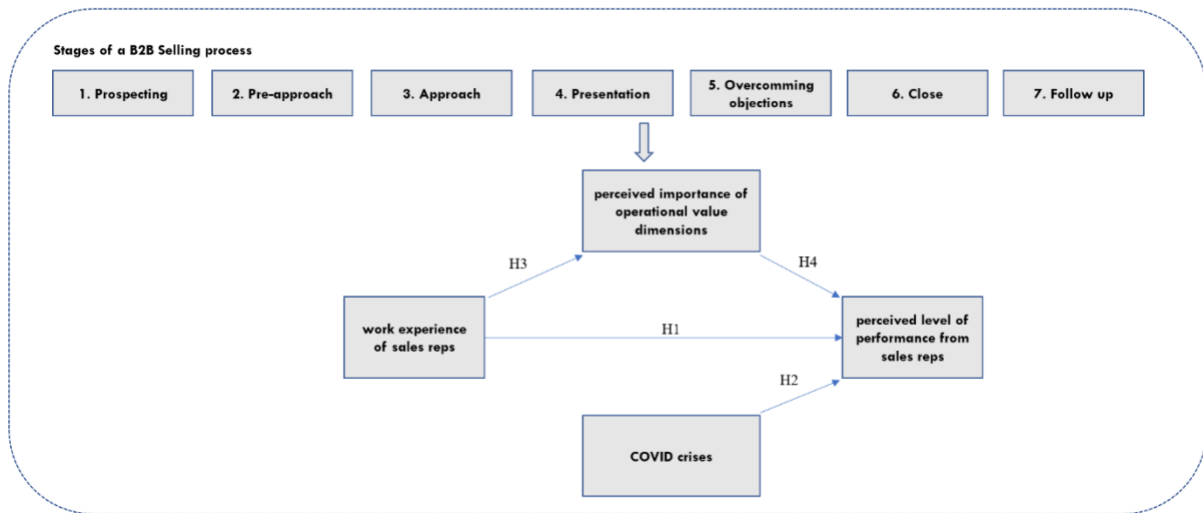


Figure 2: Conceptual Model (own source)

4. Results

Hypothesis one deals with the impact of work experience on the perceived performance during the COVID crisis. The results show that the extent of work experience influenced the perceived performance of sales representatives during the COVID crisis. Sales representatives with a work experience of less than 10 years stated that their performance improved, while both other age categories indicated performing worse during the first year after the crisis. Table one shows the difference in the perceived level of performance prior to and after the start of the COVID crisis. A negative value represents an improvement of the perceived level of performance.

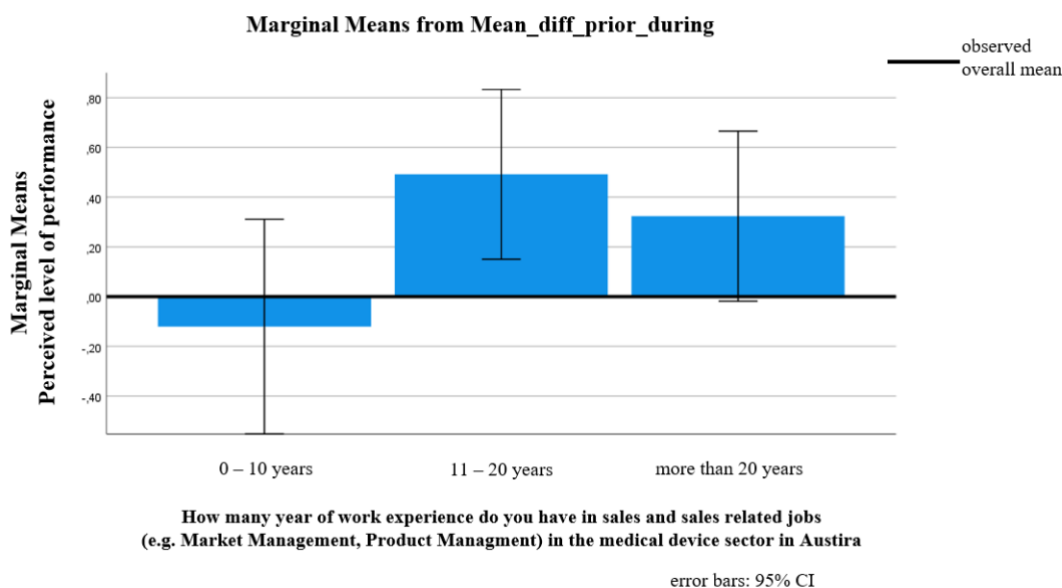


Table 1: Differences in the perceived level of performance prior and during the COVID crises and the extent of work experience (own source)

Appendix B-1 illustrates this impact with a test of between-subject effects. It can be concluded that hypothesis should be rejected, as the extent of work experience influenced the perceived level of performance of sales representatives during the COVID crisis.

Market reports show an increase of the market volume of medical devices in Austria from 2.37 billion euro in 2020 to 2.55 billion euro in 2021 (Statista, 2023). A closer look at the results of the quantitative survey leads to the conclusion that substantial environmental changes in the business environment negatively influenced the perceived performance of sales persons in general. Table 2 shows that the mean of the perceived performance prior the COVID crisis (mean_prior) was reduced from 0.9366 to 0.6549 during of the pandemic (mean_during).

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Mean_during	,6549	113	1,17608	,11064
	Mean_prior	,9366	113	,91438	,08602

Table 2: Perceived performance of sales representatives prior and during the COVID crises (own source)

A paired sample test visualises the differences in further detail (Appendix B-2). Therefore, hypothesis two can be accepted, affirming that the COVID crisis had a negative impact on the perceived performance of sales representatives in the medical device sector in Austria.

Hypothesis three investigates the impact of work experience on the usage of the operational value dimension. Although table 3 shows a correlation between work experience and this element of a value argumentation, it can be concluded that more experience sales representatives see operational value dimension as less important. The correlation with handling aspects of medical devices – which are important for user of a buying unit – is significant (Spearman-Rho .259). Based on these results, hypothesis three can be rejected, as people with a lower amount of work experience see operational value dimensions as more important.

		Work experience	
Spearman-Rho	Mean handling (cluster 2):	correlation coefficient	-,259**
		Sig. (two-sided)	,006
		N	113
	Mean procurement processes (cluster 1):	correlation coefficient	-,073
		Sig. (two-sided)	,441
		N	113
	Mean process optimisation (cluster 3)	correlation coefficient	-,183
		Sig. (two-sided)	,052
		N	113

** . significant at a 0,01 level (two-sided).

* . significant at a 0,05 level (two-sided).

Table 3: Correlation between work experience and the perceived importance of operational value dimensions (own source)

A correlation between the perceived performance and the usage of various operational value dimensions could not be detected in the data. Table 4 differentiates between the performance prior to COVID (mean_prior_Covid), during the pandemic (mean_lastyear) and the overall performance (mean overall). Therefore, hypothesis four can be rejected as there is no correlation between the perceived importance of operational value dimensions and the perceived performance of sales representatives.

		Mean_prior			
		Covid	Mean_lastyear	Mean_overall	
Spearman-Rho	Mean handling (cluster 2):	correlation coefficient	,010	-,075	-,067
		Sig. (two-sided)	,917	,432	,482
		N	113	113	113
	Mean procurement processes (cluster 1)	correlation coefficient	,185*	-,008	,070
		Sig. (two-sided)	,050	,930	,462
		N	113	113	113
	Mean process optimization (cluster 3)	correlation coefficient	,015	-,021	,015
		Sig. (two-sided)	,874	,828	,873
		N	113	113	113

* . significant at a 0,05 level (two-sided).

Table 4: correlation between the perceived performance and the usage of various operational value dimensions (own source)

5. Conclusions and implications

Sales representative are an essential driver of a company's success, especially in B2B market segment. The results of this study show that dramatic environmental changes like the COVID

crisis have a substantial impact on daily routines of selling organisations. Various scholars have explored the impact of demographic variables and selling tactics on success. Agile developments of markets driven by current challenges like fluctuating prices, high inflation and unstable political situations have led to the need to investigate success factors in personal selling more in detail. The impact of selling approaches like customer-oriented or value-based selling have to be seen in a different research context due to current market challenges. More research has to be conducted to further develop selling tactics and value propositions in the current challenging business environment.

The findings of this study indicate that companies in the medical-device industry in Austria have to adjust training activities for sales representatives. This goes hand in hand with findings from Rangarajan et al. (2021), who recommend enhancing training strategies for members of selling departments. A key result of this study is that more experienced employees have to be embedded in training practices more intensively due to the fast-changing market environment. The most common value dimension (operational value) in a value proposition can no longer be seen as a success factor, but rather value propositions have to be developed in a more holistic way in this industry sector. Accordingly, social, strategic and symbolic elements of value have to be taken into consideration.

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Appendix B-1:

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Mean_diff_prior_during

Source	Type III Sum of			F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
	Squares	df	Mean Square			
Corrected Model	6,347 ^a	2	3,173	2,477	,089	,043
Konstanter Term	5,790	1	5,790	4,519	,036	,039
Q1_3groups	6,347	2	3,173	2,477	,089	,043
Error	140,949	110	1,281			
Total	156,264	113				
Corrected Total	147,296	112				

a. R Squared = ,043 (Adjusted R Squared = ,026)

Appendix: B-2:

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences							Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Mean_during - Mean_prior	-,28171	1,14680	,10788	-,49546	-,06796	-2,611	112	,010