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B to B Sellers' Skill Level in Sales Performance – Frameworks and Findings

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study focuses on a framework of sales performance drivers, considering four areas of seller skills, and seven dimensions that the literature generally recognizes as affecting sales performance in B2B settings. The four areas and seven dimension of seller skill level are as follows: (i) interpersonal abilities, including communication as well as presentation skills; (ii) degree of adaptiveness, considering seller ability to modify both the sales approach and the sales behavior; (iii) selling-related knowledge, covering product and market-knowledge skills; and (iv) sellers' use of technology.

As a whole, assuming a pivotal role played by seller skills, the research objective is to empirically verify a conceptual framework based on B2B seller skills in the context of sales performance. This study responds to a recent call to use meta-analyses to increase research-based knowledge in the sales domain. This study offers an empirical testing of a research framework for the identification and understanding of those skills that sellers need to embrace handling and increasing value in business relationships with customers in B2B settings of tangible products. The methodology relies on a questionnaire survey using a deductive approach. A total of 315 companies were ultimately selected to take part in the study, so as to represent a range of companies from different industries and corporate sizes within the product-oriented business sector of Norway (i.e. services-oriented companies are not included). The companies were identified from the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC 2007). A total of 236 questionnaires out of 315 were returned, generating a response rate of 74.9%. Methodology/Approach

An exploratory factor analysis was undertaken to falsify or confirm the seven-dimensional framework of skill level. The initial factor analysis consisted of 21 items with three per dimension. The principal component method was applied to reveal the pattern in the factor solution. An orthogonal approach (varimax rotation) was applied to rotate the factor solution. The multi-item measures of each dimension were selected and modified from various sources. The empirical findings provide a foundation for further studies on sales performance. In particular, the findings can be used to assess the relationship between seller skill dimensions on sellers' objective and subjective performance in B2B sales settings. The findings can also be used to assess the relationship between these skill-level indicators on sellers' economic and non-economic satisfaction. Findings

Companies could use the reported findings to organize and structure the process of B2B seller planification. This study offers seven verified categories of seller skill level. Companies should focus on each category in relation to their specific industry, so as to optimize sales performance.

Seller skills become relevant with respect to taking into consideration the context of sales performance in areas such as planning and organization, recruiting and screening, training, remuneration and motivation, and evaluation and control. Note that companies need to consider the reported seven categories of skill level across all areas of sales performance. Companies should evaluate their sellers in relation to each category of skill level, and offer continuous training that is appropriate to each category.

It is evident that training is fundamental to acquiring seller skills. The recruitment and screening of sellers are also important for acquiring sellers with an appropriate level of each category of skill levels. Furthermore, companies need to evaluate the training results of sellers, and offer economic compensation in accordance with the skill level reached in each of the seven categories. This study contributes to create a B2B framework of seller skills in the context of sales performance. Accordingly, the tested and reported seven-dimensional framework provides a foundation for structuring the skill level dimensions in B2B sales settings.

A further opportunity in B2B settings is to assess the structural properties of how the seven dimensions of seller skills are associated with and related to the other sales performance indicators (i.e. seller role perceptions, motivations and aptitude, as well as the influence of organizational and environmental aspects on sellers). One such research opportunity is to assess to what extent there

KEYWORDS

Sales performance; skill level; interpersonal; adaptiveness; selling-related knowledge; sales technology; B2B; Norway

are any moderating and mediating effects between skill level, role perception, motivation, aptitude and organizational/environmental, or whether they all relate only to sales performance in B2B settings.

We conclude that the seven-dimensional framework of B2B seller skills in the context of sales performance verified in this study offers satisfactory validity and reliability. We therefore argue that the reported dimensions of B2B seller skills – i.e. interpersonal presentation and communication skills, degree of adaptiveness regarding abilities to modify sales approach and sales behavior, selling-related knowledge about customers and product/technology knowledge, and sales technology use – offer a sound foundation for assessing and following up on sales performance.

This study contributes to existing theory and previous studies, thus providing a foundation for framing relevant indicators of sales performance regarding B2B seller skills. The seven-dimensional framework therefore provides a foundation on which to structure the assessment of sales performance in B2B settings.

Introduction

The issue of seller performance, also known as sales performance, as well as its drivers, have received a primary focus in the business-to-business (B2B) marketing and selling literature as well as research (Aydin, Koc, and Kaya 2017; Limbu et al. 2016). A sound understanding of the indicators of sales performance is relevant for companies and sales managers, since overall business results are greatly dependent on the sellers' performance (Blocker et al. 2012; Darrat, Amyx, and Bennett 2017; Hohenschwert and Geiger 2015). Yet, as recent research indicates, there remains a need to deepen our understanding of sales performance drivers (Evans et al. 2012; Kwak et al. 2019; Ulaga and Kohli 2018).

Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) provide an important seminal work integrating sales performance indicators into five categories with several dimensions each, taking into consideration the meta-analysis of Churchill et al. (1985). The literature also affirms that, among the sales performance drivers identified in these meta-analyses, seller skills is the critical individual determinant in ensuring successful sales in B2B (Amor 2019; Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010; Churchill et al. 2000; Ingram et al. 2004; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977). In so, in this study we provide further insights, and a foundation for sale performance, by centering on the driver of seller skill level.

Arguably, seller skills, innate or learned, represent the individual proficiency for performing sale tasks (Ford et al. 1987; Futrell 2006; Peterson and Limbu 2009). According to the meta-analysis of Churchill et al. (1985) and

Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011), these skills include interpersonal abilities, degree of adaptivity and knowledge. In addition, Onyemah, Swain, and Hanna (2010) also suggest a need to include in research the use of internet and sales technologies as seller competence for gaining a better understanding of effective salespeople given that the use of advanced technology in the sales domain is a key challenge in today's business environment (Engle and Barnes 2000). Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) also acknowledge the growing importance of this aspect in their meta-analysis.

This study therefore focuses on a framework of sales performance drivers, based on the seminal work of Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011), considering four areas of seller skills, and seven dimensions that the literature recognizes as affecting sales performance in B2B settings. The four areas and seven dimension of seller skill level are as follows: (i) interpersonal abilities, including communication as well as presentation skills (e.g. Ford et al. 1987); (ii) degree of adaptiveness (Viio and Nordin 2017), considering sellers' ability to modify both the sales approach and the sales behavior (e.g. Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986); (iii) selling-related knowledge, covering product and market knowledge skills (e.g. Ahearne and Schillewaert 2000); and (iv) sellers' use of technology (e.g. Arli, Bauer, and Palmatier 2018).

In addition, the majority of research examines the drivers of sales performance from the perspective of manufacturers and buyers, and the sellers have even been recognized as the "third prominent actor" in B2B markets (Gulati, Bristow, and Dou

2004, 153). Indeed, sellers are a critical resource in competitive B2B settings (Moghareh Abed and Haghghi 2009) since they act as the interface between companies and customers (Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010). Thus, we consider the seller perspective in B2B in this study.

As a whole, assuming the pivotal role played by the seller skills (Amor 2019; Churchill et al. 1985; Ford et al. 1987; Rentz et al. 2002; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011), the research objective is to empirically verify a conceptual framework based on B2B seller skills in the context of sales performance. This study also considers Johnson and Jaramillo (2017) recent call to increase research based knowledge in the sales domain.

The conceptual framework used in this study is primarily based on the meta-analysis of Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011), but also secondarily on the meta-analysis of Churchill et al. (1985). Furthermore, since it has been recognized that sale performance drivers are also affected by the industry context and the type of products that sellers offer (Churchill et al. 1985; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011), this study focuses on the dimensions identified in their meta-analyses at the B2B seller skill level, but the focus is particularly on the sales performance of tangible products in B2B markets. Indeed, selling a product or a service is different given the particular characteristics of the offering (Parasuraman, Zelthaml, and Beryy 1985) as well as the selling process, with greater interaction between sellers and buyers in the service context (Padin et al. 2015; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996), which moderates the “predictive power” of these categories of sales performance drivers (Churchill et al. 1985; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011).

In essence, though B2B seller skills across areas and their sales performance has been reported previously in literature, it is still an area that need more depth. There are many interrelated variables, all of which can influence the outcome of sales performance, and that B2B seller skills vary across business settings.

It should be noted that the findings reported in the studies by Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) and Churchill et al. (1985) were not empirically tested, but only conceptualized based on previous studies. Subsequently, their conceptual findings have until

this moment not been empirically verified based on a sample of B2B sellers. In addition, Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) study was undertaken almost a decade ago. Societies, markets and sales management practices are continuously evolving, so it was relevant to verify the validity and reliability of the conceptual assumptions of meta-analysis reported by Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011), and Churchill et al. (1985). In addition, this study verifies the validity and reliability of assumptions made about US market in a European context, whether the previously reported findings are applicable across business contexts.

Overall, the relevance of this study is as follows: (1) contributes to verifying the validity and reliability of Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) and Churchill et al.’s (1985) conceptual framework at the level of seller skill dimensions in the context of sales performance; (2) offers insights into performance drivers in B2B settings; (3); rests on the seller perspective in B2B settings; and finally, (4) empirically verifies the seven-dimensional framework of B2B seller skills, offering a valuable framework for researchers and managers in B2B settings.

Accordingly, the article is structured as follows: first, we theoretically frame seller skills in the context of sales performance and offer a seven-dimensional framework. Subsequently, we empirically test it on a sample of Norwegian product-oriented businesses in B2B settings. Next, we present research and managerial implications. and finally draw conclusions and offer new research insights, as well as suggestions for the future.

Framing seller skills in B2B sales performance

Improving seller performance is a key aspect in B2B settings, as it clearly affects overall company performance (Boles et al. 2000). A better understanding of the antecedents of sales performance has therefore been, a key issue for research in sales and marketing (Evans et al. 2012).

Already in the seventies, Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) presented their seminal work grouping sales performance research, and identified a set of individual, interpersonal, organizational and environmental variables that may influence seller

motivation and job performance. Considering this groundwork, Churchill et al. (1985) conducted another seminal study containing 409 citations from 63 journals offering six major drivers of sales performance for sellers in B2B settings as follows: (i) personal variables, (ii) skill variables, (iii) role variables, (iv) aptitude variables, (v) motivational variables, and (vi) organizational/environmental variables.

Years later, Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) conducted a follow-up meta-analysis, including 389 studies, and synthesizing empirical evidence from 1982 to 2008. It covers the seminal work of Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) and Churchill et al. (1985). Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) reorganize these seminal works and consider five categories of sales performance drivers, namely: (i) selling-related knowledge, (ii) degree of adaptiveness, (iii) role ambiguity, (iv) cognitive aptitude, and (v) work engagement; all of which demonstrate significant relationships with sales performance. Moreover, Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) consider different sub-categories that are moderated by measurement method, research context, and sales-type variables (i.e. industrial goods, consumer goods and services) (Churchill et al. 1985; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011).

Acknowledging the importance of the identified previous categories of sales performance drivers in B2B settings, it has also been established that sellers' skills are the primary ones (Amor 2019; Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010; Churchill et al. 2000, 1985; Ford et al. 1987; Ingram et al. 2004; Rentz et al. 2002; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977). As a matter of fact, in the sales arena, marketing managers are very much concerned with the identification and understanding of those aspects that drive sellers to be more effective (Herjanto and Franklin 2019), and thus help companies to accomplish their financial goals (Koyas 2003).

Hence, ever since the seminal work of Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) and Churchill et al. (1985), the literature has paid particular attention to the identification of those relevant seller characteristics that are key inputs for sales performance (Ford et al. 1987; Park and Holloway 2003; Rentz et al. 2002) as covered in Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) meta-analysis.

The effect of seller skills on sales performance in B2B is well established in the literature (Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010; Ford, Baldwin, and Prasad 2018). The predominant strategy in B2B settings implies direct and face-to-face communication with the customers (Futrell 2006). But, “... very few empirical studies that have been done to establish that these distinct skills actually have a considerable impact on performance ...” (Punwatkar and Varghese 2014, 81). Clearly, more research is still needed (Kwak et al. 2019; Ulaga and Kohli 2018), in B2B settings, since seller skills appear to be “... the most important predictor of sales performance ...” (Rentz et al. 2002, 13).

Accordingly, and built primarily on Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) meta-analysis, this study offers an empirical testing of a research framework for the identification and understanding of those relevant skills that sellers need to embrace handling and increasing value in business relationships with customers in B2B settings of tangible products. In particular, we present the following categories of skills with the intention of helping managers predict sellers' performance levels: (i) interpersonal, (ii) degree of adaptiveness, (iii) selling-related knowledge, and (iv) the use of sales technology (see Figure 1).

Interpersonal skills

Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen (2010, 54) defined interpersonal skills as those “... mental and communication algorithms applied during social communication and interaction to reach certain effects and results ...” In the field of sales, these competences include persuasion, solving conflicts, presentation, ability to listen, observation and empathy (Churchill et al. 1985; Rentz et al. 2002), that salespeople use in sales presentations and interpersonal communication with their clients to improve the negotiation and, in the end, increase sales.

In B2B contexts, interpersonal skills are extremely relevant to achieving high sales performance, since sales are about “... successful interaction with the client ...” (Manna and Smith 2004, 67). In effect, interpersonal skills affect the sellers' ability to adapt their strategies during sales interactions (Simintiras et al. 2013). Thus, companies should

Interpersonal		Degree of Adaptiveness		Selling-Related Knowledge		Sales Technology
(i) Presentation Skills	(ii) Communication Skills	(iii) Ability to Modify Sales Approach	(iv) Ability to Modify Sales Behaviour	(v) Product/ Technological Knowledge	(vi) Customer Knowledge	(vii) Use of Technology

Figure 1. Seller skills in B2B sales performance – framework.

consider the issue of interpersonal skill as a critical component when recruiting sales staff (Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010).

These skills have been grouped into two main dimensions, namely communication and presentation (Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011). Consequently, salespeople with competent communication competences and good presentation skills will engage in appropriate and meaningful communication with customers (Griffith 2002), be able to explain the features, benefits and usability of the product better (Abdolvand and Farzaneh 2013), be capable of anticipating customer need (Johlke 2006) and as a result, will better achieve targets and goals (Omar 2018; Williams and Spiro 1985). Therefore, enhancing these interpersonal abilities in the team of sellers (i.e. presentation and communication skills), will surely enable sellers to improve their sales performance (Boorum, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998; Koponen, Julkunen, and Asai 2019; Punwatkar and Varghese 2014).

Degree of adaptiveness

In actual market situations characterized by rapid changes, successful sellers with the ability to adapt their selling has been recognized as a critical element for company success in B2B settings (Arlı, Bauer, and Palmatier 2018; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011). This skill or sales competence, known as the degree of adaptiveness, has been defined by Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan (1986, 175) as: “... *the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation*” In effect, this adaptive sales skill reflects the degree to which sellers consciously employ different customization strategies (Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010)

and has been conceptualized as a process that sellers undertake to adapt their selling approaches to their customers (Spiro and Weitz 1990). As a result, practicing this adaptive selling behavior has a positive effect on sales performance (Boorum, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998; Franke and Park 2006; Jaramillo et al. 2007; Park and Deitz 2006; Spiro and Weitz 1990; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011).

In other words, in order to succeed in a B2B sales settings, sellers need to make conscious efforts to adapt different aspects of their selling practices and behaviors. Thus, the sales literature acknowledges the relevance for sellers in understanding a selling situation and being able to adapt their sales approach and behavior accordingly (Altıntaş et al. 2017; Evans et al. 2012). The degree of adaptiveness includes two dimension, namely the ability to modify the sales approach and the ability to modify sales behavior (Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011).

If sellers are able to appropriately modify both their approach and/or behaviors when interacting with their customers, they will be in a better position to increase their sales performance (Franke and Park 2006; Jaramillo et al. 2007). Indeed, it is important for companies that their sellers present sales capabilities or competences to adapt themselves and their behaviors to the customers and the situation, in order to achieve their goal (i.e. closing sales). Therefore, a successful seller in B2B settings that presents such adaptive skills (i.e. the ability to adapt sales approach and behavior), and uses these procedures when interacting with consumers, will be more likely to close the sale (Futrell 2006; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011; Williams, Spiro, and Fine 1990).

Selling-related knowledge

Selling-related knowledge is also considered a macro sale skill that highly effective sellers possess (Rentz et al. 2002) and reflects the idea that selling involves knowledge that sellers need to possess in order to be able to adapt their sales strategy to both market and customers (Kwak et al. 2019; Leong, Busch, and John 1989; Weitz, Sujana, and Sujana 1986). In particular, this selling-related knowledge reflects: “... *the quantity and richness of knowledge that salespeople use in selling the products* ...” and reflects the idea that “selling involves knowledge-based solutions for customers” (Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal 2011, 411) and includes two dimensions: knowledge about product features and knowledge about customers. Accordingly, sellers who possess rich product and customer knowledge will be able to adapt their sales strategy to the clients (Kumar, Venkatesan, and Reinatz 2008; Leong, Busch, and John 1989) and apply more productive sales techniques (Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010; Weitz, Sujana, and Sujana 1986).

Product knowledge has been considered as a technical skill that reflects seller competence in providing information and specifications about the product itself, as well as its applications, functions and technological development (Ahmad, Sah, and Kitchen 2010; Churchill et al. 2000; Futrell 2006). This product-knowledge skill and understanding of the product (in terms of its specifications or applications) helps sellers to provide relevant and correct information to customers (Amor 2019; Rentz et al. 2002), link features with customer needs (Punwatkar and Varghese 2014) and enhances their performance of sales tasks (Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010).

On the other hand, customer knowledge, also essentially marketing knowledge, reflects sellers understanding of the industry in which they operate, including knowledge regarding customer needs, rivals, industry and company trends (Ahearne and Schillewaert 2000; Ahmad, Sah, and Kitchen 2010; Futrell 2006; Manning et al. 2015). In words of Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen (2010, 55), customer knowledge “... *constitute(s) the marketing skills of a salesperson* ...” and covers firm’s internal and external or industrial environmental knowledge (Ingram et al. 2004), which enables

salespeople to be more efficient in fitting their sales strategy to each customer in the market (Ingram et al. 2004; Leong, Busch, and John 1989; Rentz et al. 2002).

The sales field reveals that both knowledge (i.e. product and customer) assets are critical sales skills, as they reflect the level of understanding that sellers have regarding the business setting in which they work (Basir, Ahmad, and Kitchen 2010), and can lead to rising sales. For example, knowledgeable sellers overcome objections more effectively instill greater confidence in customers, and are able to do cross-selling more effectively too (Punwatkar and Varghese 2014). Similarly, customer knowledge reflects the sellers’ understanding of the market in which they operate (Ahearne and Schillewaert 2000; Futrell 2006) and this skill enables the salesforce to more accurately identify existing and potential customer and market needs (Román and Munuera 2005) and deliver better services to the clients (Fayyazi and Moddaresnia 2017).. As a result, having and using both product and customer selling-related knowledge result in higher sales performance (Ahearne and Schillewaert 2000; Ahmad, Sah, and Kitchen 2010; Baldauf and Cravens 2002; Churchill et al. 2000; Futrell 2006; Ingram et al. 2004; Rentz et al. 2002).

Use of sales technology

An ongoing trend in the selling context relates to the increasing use of technology in the sales function (Kumar et al. 2020). In fact, the use of advanced technology has been referred to as one of today’s major business challenges in the sales domain (Engle and Barnes 2000; Gulati, Bristow, and Dou 2004; Kumar et al. 2020) with a: “... *de facto influence on every industry as it impacts corporate strategies* ...” (Rachinger et al. 2019, 1143).

Emerging and enduring trends in sales organization, affirmed that sales technology is a major trend that is transforming the sales organization. On this issue, Schultz, Schwepker, and Good (2012) or Guesalaga (2016) recognized the particular relevance of using social media technologies in the sales function in business-to-business marketing, and Kumar et al. (2020) acknowledged how

companies are at the present time introducing technology such as CRM software and sales-enhancement tools.

Certainly, the adoption of such technology and tools by a salesforce helps them to improve their business activity in many ways such as: reporting to superiors; tracking, reminding and simplifying, and speeding up tasks; analyzing and managing clients' data and increasing loyalty and satisfaction (Manohar and Clouham 2017). As a result, and according to LinkedIn Sales Navigator state of sales (2020), the sales organizations are nowadays embracing virtual selling, and indeed, the number of sales professionals relying on sales intelligence tools has risen to 54% in the last two years. Even more so, the transition to virtual selling has been accelerating substantially and rapidly in light of coronavirus.

Therefore, in the selling context, the increased use of technology is causing an on-going transformation of the sales function, because sales technology is: “... specifically designed to help salespeople meet their objectives ...” (Ahearne et al. 2008, 673). Indeed, this authors demonstrate a significant relationship between seller use of technology and their performance, given that technology influences adaptive selling abilities and knowledge. Also, Sharma and Sheth (2010) confirmed that those salespeople who are faster in adopting sales technologies will indeed perform better.

In this context, and to achieve a better understanding of effective sellers, Onyemah, Swain, and Hanna (2010) suggest the need to consider how technology affects sellers' performance and similarly, Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) recognize the importance of using the internet and sales technologies as a salesperson competence in current knowledge economies as a driver of sales performance. Gulati, Bristow, and Dou (2004) or Sharma and Sheth (2010). find a particularly positive relationship between seller use of the internet and sales performance. Indeed, recently Sharma, Rangarajan, and Paesbrugghe (2020) found that those salespeople with greater adaptation to the use of technology that is relevant to customers will perform better in today's business activities and sales.

Sales technology are important for several reasons in business marketing practice. For example, the technology can be used to record customer call information, which gives the seller the opportunity to work more efficient with relevant customer information available (i.e. previous sales, meeting notes previous discussions, contacts and contracts). The technology can be used to plan territory management activities. that gives the seller the opportunity to more efficient handling of the own territory (i.e. determine location of customers, size of customers, efficient travel routs, earlier reports). Furthermore, technology can be used to prepare sales presentations based on customer's specific needs that gives the seller better opportunity to tailor-make sales presentations based om customer needs (i.e. see what customers have search for on internet to determine potential competitors, stage in buying process and customers interests).

Framework of seller skills

Nonetheless, further investigation is needed on this topic to understand sales performance (Arli, Bauer, and Palmatier 2018; Sharma, Rangarajan, and Paesbrugghe 2020; Kumar et al. 2020). Therefore, it seems a worthy challenge to consider the use of technology in understanding seller skills that affect sales performance.

All in all, this study presents a framework considering four principal areas of B2B seller skill level, identified as sales performance drivers. In addition, in accordance with the above explanations, these four areas are divided into seven dimensions as follows (see also Figure 1): interpersonal, referring to presentation skills; (ii) interpersonal referring to communication skills; (iii) degree of adaptiveness referring to the ability to modify the sales approach; (vi) degree of adaptiveness referring to the ability to modify sales behavior; (v) selling-related knowledge about product/technology and (vi) selling-related knowledge about customers; and (vii) sales technology referring to seller use of technology.

Methodology

Dimensions and items

This study is based on the findings reported in meta-analyses on sales performance from Verbeke, Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) and Churchill et al. (1985). Common denominators across these meta-analyses consist of a selection of principal skill-level dimensions in B2B sales-performance settings.

The dimensions and items used in the questionnaire on skill level have been adapted to this study from previous ones in an iterative process. Several main aspects identified in the meta analyses by Verbeke, Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) (i.e. interpersonal, degree of adaptiveness and selling-related knowledge plus sales technology) have been divided into dimensions. In total, seven dimensions were used in this study as follows (see also Table 1 with items): (i) sellers' interpersonal presentation skills (Shannahan et al. 2015); sellers' interpersonal communication skills (Boorum, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998); sellers'

degree of adaptiveness and ability to modify the sales approach (Spiro and Weitz 1990); (iv) sellers' degree of adaptiveness and ability to modify sales behavior (Lennox and Wolfe 1984); (v) sellers' selling-related knowledge of customers (Shannahan et al. 2015); (vi) sellers' selling-related knowledge of products and technology (Román and Iacobucci 2010); sales technology relating to sellers' use of technology (Engle and Barnes 2000).

A five-point Likert-type scale was used for all items, with strongly agree (5) and strongly disagree (1) as the anchor points.

Sample and context

The methodology relies on a questionnaire survey using a deductive approach. A total of 315 companies were ultimately selected to take part in the study so as to represent a range of companies from different industries and corporate sizes within the product-oriented business sector of Norway. That is, services-oriented companies are not included, as the type of product involved has been generally considered an "influenceable" issue in the literature, when studying sales performance drivers (Churchill et al. 1985; Verbeke, Dietz., and Verwaal 2011). The exclusion of services companies in our work is relevant and relates to both the literature and research. In particular, the literature suggests that the various indicators of seller performance, including seller skills, are affected by the type of products (goods or services) that sellers offer (Churchill et al. 1985; Verbeke, Dietz., and Verwaal 2011). In effect, the various characteristics of services (e.g. Berry and Parasuraman 1991) imply a more interactive and people-based selling process, in which relationships between sellers and buyers are more intense (Padin et al. 2015; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996) and clearly "... affect the outcome of the sale ... " (Verbeke, Dietz., and Verwaal 2011, 417).

It should be noted that the sample most studies used of product-oriented companies in B2B business contexts also are services-oriented (though classified as mainly product-oriented). The sample was identified and based on the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC 2007). Subsequently, it was decided not to mix mainly product-oriented companies with purely services-oriented ones, so as to avoid blurring the characteristics of sample used in

Table 1. Seller skills in B2B Sales Performance – Dimensions and items.

*** Skill level ***
Sellers' Interpersonal Presentation Skills
a) I focus on figuring out the real concerns of our customers.
b) I convince our customers that I understand their unique concerns.
c) I communicate my sales presentations clearly.
Sellers' Interpersonal Communication Skills
a) I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
b) I am calm in conversations.
c) I feel relaxed while conversing with a new acquaintance.
Sellers' Degree of Adaptiveness about the Ability to Modify Sales Approach
a) I can change to another approach when I feel that my sales approach is not working.
b) I modify my sales presentation if the situation calls for it.
c) I feel confident that I can change my planned presentation when necessary.
Sellers' Degree of Adaptiveness regarding the Ability to Modify Sales Behavior
a) I have the ability to control the way I come across to people, depending on the impression I wish to give them.
b) When I feel that the image I portray is not working, I can change it to something that does.
c) I have no trouble changing my behavior to suit different people.
Sellers' Selling-Related Knowledge about Product/Technology
a) I keep up with my company's production developments.
b) I know the specifications of my company's offerings.
c) I keep up with my company's technological developments.
Sellers' Selling-Related Knowledge about Customers
a) My ability to understand customer's buying motives is excellent.
b) My ability to distinguish between different kinds of customers is excellent.
c) My ability to identify and analyze customer needs is excellent.
Sellers' Use of Sales Technology
a) I use technology to record customer call information.
b) I use technology to plan territory-management activities.
c) I use technology to prepare sales presentations based on my customer's specific needs.

this study. It was also decided this way, based on the fact that the type of product has been considered as an “influenceable” issue in literature when studying sales performance drivers (Churchill et al. 1985; Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal 2011).

The survey was performed digitally by means of Qualtrics. A link to the questionnaire was accompanied by a letter of introduction, containing the contact details of the research team, was provided to the key informants. The targeted informants are sellers, team leaders, sales managers, key account managers and regional managers. Norwegian managers are often involved actively in sales, though some limited to the most important customers. Two main criteria for a key informant to be included were that: (i) the salesperson had budget responsibility and was measured against this budget; and (ii) main responsibility of the key informant to be actively involved in selling, not managing others to sell.

We talked to sales directors and identified companies willing to contribute to the study. We asked key informants to collaborate on the study and e-mail reminders were sent or telephone calls made to encourage key informants to fill in the questionnaire if they had not done so within seven days of the initial request. This procedure was repeated two and three weeks after the initial request, if the questionnaires had still not been returned. A total of 236 questionnaires out of 315 were returned, generating a response rate of 74.9%. The response rate is high compared with other studies in which ones the sample are sellers, this is because the questionnaire was administered in a paper and pencil format, face-to-face is a good way to ensure to have answers from sellers that are hard respondents.

At the end of the questionnaire we had two screening questions, namely: (i) total years of sales experience of key informants, and (ii) total years of sales experience in the current company for key informants, with the aim of verifying the

competency of the key informants. This is in line with Campbell's (1955) proposal that key informants participating in a study need to be competent enough to answer questions relating to the subject matter – here, sales-performance indicators in B2B settings. The findings of the screening questions reveal that the mean value of key informants is 20.4 years for their total sales experience, with a median of 20.0 years. The findings also indicate a mean value of 10.9 years for key informants' total sales experience in the current company, with a median of 8.0 years. Univariate and multivariate statistical techniques were used to analyze the data collected during the empirical phase of the study. The empirical findings are presented in the following section.

Empirical findings

Sample characteristics

The characteristics of the cross-industry sample of this study represent a range of Norwegian product-oriented businesses in B2B settings as shown in Table 2.

Table 3 reports the outcome of univariate analysis regarding items of each dimension of skill-level indicators, showing a very low non-response bias. The table also shows the mean values, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis for the skill indicators items measured. The outcome of univariate statistics reported in Table 3 indicate consistent and high-quality responses from the key informants.

Factor analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (Norusis 1993, 1994) was undertaken to falsify or confirm the seven-dimensional framework of skill level, based on the meta-analyses by Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal

Table 2. Nature of cross-industry sample.

Nature of Business	Count	Full-Time employee equivalent	Count	Annual turnover (Euro)	Count
Mining and quarrying	5	1–19	0	0–4.9 Millions	0
Manufacturing	125	20–99	26	5.0–49.9 Millions	39
Electricity	1	100–249	116	50.0–99.9 Millions	106
Water supply	10	250–999	78	100–249 Millions	41
Construction	5	1000+	16	250+ Millions	50
Total	236	Total	236	Total	236

Table 3. Skill-level indicators in sales performance – univariate statistics.

Dimension	Item	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Interpersonal – presentation skills	a)	232	4.65	0.49	−0.73	−1.18
	b)	232	4.43	0.63	−0.94	1.36
	c)	232	4.32	0.69	−0.75	0.59
Interpersonal – communication skills	a)	232	4.25	0.68	−0.62	0.26
	b)	232	4.16	0.68	−0.55	0.44
	c)	231	4.29	0.74	−1.05	1.26
Degree of Adaptiveness – ability to modify sales approach	a)	232	3.80	0.83	−0.56	0.18
	b)	232	4.22	0.75	−0.78	0.73
	c)	232	4.23	0.70	−0.81	1.02
Degree of Adaptiveness – ability to modify sales behavior	a)	232	3.76	0.83	−0.26	−0.24
	b)	232	3.78	0.83	−0.63	0.49
	c)	232	4.11	0.73	−0.58	0.29
Selling-Related Knowledge – product/technical knowledge	a)	231	4.43	0.59	−0.74	0.97
	b)	231	4.05	0.86	−0.80	0.23
	c)	231	4.16	0.79	−0.94	0.86
Selling-Related Knowledge – customer knowledge	a)	232	3.92	0.72	−0.45	0.33
	b)	231	4.09	0.72	−0.70	0.83
	c)	231	3.96	0.71	−0.59	0.65
Sales Technology – use of technology	a)	232	4.19	0.86	−1.04	0.84
	b)	232	4.10	0.90	−1.08	0.96
	c)	232	4.07	0.89	−1.05	1.12

(2011). The initial factor analysis consisted of 21 items with three per dimension as shown in Table 1. The principal component method was applied to reveal the pattern in the factor solution. An orthogonal approach (varimax rotation) was applied to rotate the factor solution.

The factor analysis was based on the seven dimensions of skill level found in the meta-analysis of Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011). The multi-item measures of each dimension were borrowed and modified from various sources as follows:

- interpersonal:
 - presentation skills (Shannahan et al. 2015)
 - communication skills (Boorum, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998)
- degree of adaptiveness:
 - ability to modify sales approach (Spiro and Weitz 1990),
 - ability to modify sales behavior (Lennox and Wolfe 1984)
- selling-related knowledge:
 - customer knowledge (Shannahan et al. 2015),
 - product/technology knowledge (Román and Iacobucci 2010),
- sales technology:
 - use of technology (Engle and Barnes 2000).

Factor solution

Table 4 shows that the outcome of the refined factor solution is satisfactory (KMO/Overall MSA: 0.808; Bartlett's Test: Approx. Chi-Square: 1679,788: df: 171: Sig: 0.000). Measures of sampling adequacy range between 0.66–0.90. Communalities range between 0.62–0.84, with a total explained variance of 73.4%. The Cronbach Alphas for the seven factors range between 0.59–0.82. Two items are excluded in the refined factor analysis as follows: Interpersonal – item 'c' of presentation skills and item 'a' of communication skills.

We conclude that all seven factors identified in the factor solution of seller skills in sales performance and reported in Table 4 overall indicate acceptable convergent, discriminant and nomological validity, as well as reliability of each sub-dimension.

Research implications

The importance of seller skills in sales performance

We see that seller skill level is the most important indicator of sales performance in B2B settings, according to the meta-analyses by Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) and Churchill et al. (1985). The empirical assessment of seller skills is therefore particularly relevant in B2B sales settings.

This study contributes to creating a B2B framework of seller skills in sales performance. Accordingly, the tested and reported seven-dimensional framework provides a foundation for structuring the skill level dimensions in B2B sales settings. In essence, this study confirms the findings of the meta-analysis reported by Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011), and Churchill et al. (1985).

The empirical findings reported here therefore provide a foundation for further studies on sales performance. In particular, the findings can be used to assess the relationship between sellers' skill-level dimensions on sellers' objective and subjective performance in B2B sales settings. The findings can also be used to assess the relationship between these skill level indicators on sellers' economic and non-economic satisfaction.

Table 4.

Dimension and Item		Factor(s)							*	**
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Selling-Related Knowledge – product/technical knowledge	c)	.845	.080	.145	.021	.097	.008	.107	0.763	0.775
	a)	.833	.192	-.028	-.022	.085	.074	.017	0.745	0.787
	b)	.768	.159	-.051	-.034	.025	.162	.080	0.653	0.790
Selling-Related Knowledge – customer knowledge	a)	.121	.813	.065	.159	.128	.185	.096	0.765	0.855
	b)	.146	.804	.120	.106	.087	.080	.067	0.711	0.867
	c)	.259	.756	.100	.187	.207	.129	-.003	0.743	0.866
Sales Technology – use of technology	b)	.030	.057	.877	.085	-.008	.001	.062	0.784	0.661
	a)	.084	.034	.829	.140	.039	.078	-.047	0.725	0.711
	c)	-.057	.180	.716	-.029	.209	.090	.184	0.635	0.770
Degree of Adaptiveness – ability to modify sales approach	a)	.042	.118	.044	.889	.141	.071	.067	0.622	0.890
	b)	-.083	.161	.133	.832	.254	.087	.020	0.753	0.791
	c)	.002	.248	.086	.595	.170	.113	.395	0.758	0.812
Degree of Adaptiveness – ability to modify sales behavior	b)	.045	.023	.089	.160	.833	.125	.086	0.816	0.778
	c)	.255	.277	-.027	.185	.742	-.069	.162	0.620	0.905
	a)	.021	.219	.190	.235	.650	.216	.113	0.838	0.775
Interpersonal – presentation skills	a)	.151	.107	.110	.046	.060	.864	.014	0.799	0.772
	b)	.073	.236	.036	.169	.159	.777	.161	0.745	0.815
Interpersonal – communication skills	b)	.014	.046	.091	.134	.083	.139	.859	0.792	0.795
	c)	.409	.084	.076	.078	.254	-.011	.653	0.678	0.803
*** (%)		12.5	12.0	11.2	11.1	10.6	8.2	7.7		
**** (%)		12.5	24.6	35.8	46.9	57.4	65.7	73.4		
*****		0.79	0.82	0.77	0.75	0.81	0.69	0.59		

*Communality per Item.
 **Measures of Sampling Adequacy (MSA per Item).
 ***Total explained variance per factor.
 ****Cumulative explained total variance.
 ***** Cronbach's Alpha.

Several indicators for sales performance

A further opportunity in B2B settings is to assess the structural properties how the seven dimensions of seller skills are associated with and related to the other sales performance indicators (i.e. sellers' role perception, motivations and aptitude, as well as the

influence of organizational and environmental aspects on sellers), as reported by Verbeke., Dietz., and Verwaal (2011) and Churchill et al. (1985).

One such research opportunity, as shown in Figure 2, is to assess to what extent there are any moderating and mediating effects between skill

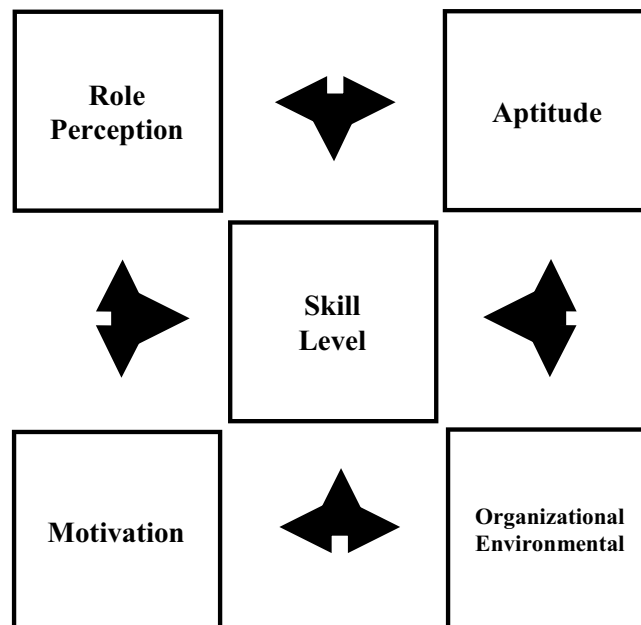


Figure 2. Structural properties between sales performance indicators.

level, role perception, motivation, aptitude and organizational/environmental, or whether they all only relate to sales performance in B2B settings.

Differences between objective and subjective performance

This study has focused on seller skills in B2B sales performance. Seller skills are seen as indicators of sales performance in B2B settings. The actual sales performance in previous research have been approached through different measure, such as objective and subjective performance. Bommer et al. (1995, 588) write that: “... although there are multiple ways to partition performance measures, the most popular has been between objective and subjective measures ...” Bommer et al. (1995, 587) assert that: “... objective and subjective performance measures should not be used interchangeably ...,” which is in line with Murphy and Cleveland (1991). Though previous research in the field of sales performance commonly conclude that sellers should be evaluated against factors they can control. Nevertheless, it is often violated in practice (Cravens et al 1993). In spite of these theoretical recommendations and empirical findings, research (e.g., Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994) continue to treat different performance measures synonymously. Cravens et al. (1993) argue the importance of maintaining the distinction between sellers’ non-selling performance and sellers’ behavioral performance. Behrman and Perreault (1982) comment that sellers often have to undertake a variety of actions not necessarily sales related (e.g., provide information and expense control. Macintosh and Krush (2017) finds that the correlation between objective and subjective performance was higher for women than for men. However, without considering gender differences, their results show that both professional networking and customer networking are related to subjective performance, but only customer networking is significantly related to objective performance.

Indicators of B2B sales performance relate commonly to objective and subjective performance measures (Bommer et al. (1995). Specifically, B2B sales performance could be measured taking into account: percentage of achievement of objectives; time needed to the achievement of objectives; and salary increased due to the achievement of objectives. There are also other performance measures related to peers, such as

the achievement related to peers’ achievements. Additionally, sales performance measures could also relate to the objectives of gaining new accounts and sales of new products. However, new measures may focus on the frequency of training employees, number of employees trained annually and amount spent per employee on training annually.

There is a line of new measures linked to the evolution of performance drivers of this study, such as focusing on the improvement of each: improved product/technical knowledge; improved customer knowledge; improved use of sales technology; improved ability to modify sales approach; improved ability to modify sales behavior; improved presentation skills and improved communication skills.

Additional area of research implication is the relevance of seller skills in relation to objective and subjective measures of B2B sales performance.

Managerial implications

Companies could use the reported findings to organize and structure the process of B2B seller planification. This study offers seven verified categories of seller skill level. Companies should focus on each category in relation to their specific industry, so as to optimize sales performance.

Seller skills becomes relevant in taking into consideration in the context of sales performance in areas such as planning and organization, recruiting and screening, training, remuneration and motivation, and evaluation and control (Churchill et al. 2000, 1985). Note that companies need to consider the reported seven categories of skill level across all areas of sales performance. Companies should evaluate their sellers in relation to each category of skill level and offer continuous training that is appropriate to each category. For example, sellers which possess satisfactory communication skills do not necessarily possess satisfactory presentation skills, and possessing product knowledge skills may no relate to customer-knowledge skills.

Consequently, training is one of the most important tools for managers and organizations, as part of good planning. The recruiting and screening of sellers are also important for acquiring sellers with an appropriate level of each category of skill levels. Furthermore, companies need to evaluate the training

results of sellers, and offer economic compensation regarding the skill level reached in each of the seven categories.

Conclusions and suggestions for further studies

We conclude that the seven-dimensional framework of B2B seller skills in the context of sales performance verified in this study offers satisfactory validity and reliability. We therefore argue that the reported dimensions of B2B seller skills – i.e. interpersonal presentation and communication skills, degree of adaptiveness regarding abilities to modify sales approach and sales behavior, selling-related knowledge about customers and product/technology knowledge, and sales technology use – offer a sound foundation for assessing and following up on sales performance.

This study contributes to existing theory and previous studies, thus providing a foundation for framing relevant indicators of sales performance regarding B2B seller skills. The seven-dimensional framework therefore provides a foundation on which to structure the assessment of sales performance in B2B settings.

This study suffers from several limitations that provide opportunities for further research. The Norwegian profile of B2B sellers in this study may differ from other countries as the ones in this study have to a large extent higher educational level. It offers possibilities to verify whether the tested framework and findings are valid and reliable in other B2B settings. The salaries of the Norwegian B2B sellers are to a large extent fixed with only a minor part flexible, such as commission and bonuses. It may indicate that the importance of seller skills to be different in other B2B settings. In addition, the B2B business culture differs from other countries, which could affect the way to establish relationships or close deals. Furthermore, this study has an empirical focus on B2B sellers, as well as product-oriented companies only. This offers at least two opportunities for further studies. Consequently, one opportunity for further studies is to examine the seven-dimensional framework of B2B sellers in services firms. Another may be to assess B2C contexts of sales performance in market for premium products or services that commonly are expensive

(e.g. vehicles) product sales offers and up-market or luxury service-solution offers (e.g. investments and travel arrangements).

The seven-dimensional framework evidently requires further assessment in other business setting, such as similar or different business setting across European countries. It also requires further assessment in non-western business settings in Africa and Asia, for instance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Implications for business marketing practice

this study reports a framework of sales performance drivers that are relevant to sales managers in business marketing practice. It considers four areas of seller skills, and seven dimensions affecting sales performance in B2B settings. The four areas and seven dimension of seller skills are as follows: (i) B2B sellers' interpersonal abilities, including communication as well as presentation skills; (ii) B2B sellers' degree of adaptiveness, considering seller ability to modify the sales approach and their ability to modify the sales behavior; (iii) B2B selling-related knowledge, covering product and market knowledge skills; and (iv) B2B sellers' use of technology.

Sales managers could use the reported findings in business marketing practice to organize and structure the process of B2B seller planification, as this study offers seven verified categories of seller skills. Sales managers may focus on each category of seller skills in relation to their specific industry, so as to optimize sales performance in B2B contexts.

Seller skills become relevant in business marketing practice, taking into consideration the context of sales performance in areas such as: (i) planning and organization, (ii) recruiting and screening, (iii) training, (iv) remuneration and motivation, and (v) evaluation and control. It should be noted that in business marketing practice, sales managers need to consider the reported seven categories of seller skills across all areas of sales performance in B2B settings.

In business marketing practice, sales managers should evaluate their B2B sellers in relation to each category of skills, and offer continuous training that is appropriate to each category. For example, B2B sellers, even if all of which possess satisfactory communication skills, do not necessarily possess satisfactory presentation skills, and possessing product-knowledge skills may not relate to customer-knowledge skills.

Consequently, the training of B2B sellers in business marketing practice is one of the most important tools for sales managers and their sales organizations, as part of good sales planning. The recruitment and screening of B2B sellers are also important in business marketing practice for acquiring sellers with an appropriate level of each category of skills. Furthermore, in business marketing practice, companies need to evaluate the training results of B2B sellers, and offer economic remuneration regarding the skills acquired in each of the seven categories.

Improving B2B seller performance in business marketing practice is a key aspect in B2B settings. It clearly affects overall company performance. A better understanding of the antecedents of B2B sales performance in business marketing practice is therefore important.

Acknowledging the importance in business marketing practice of the identified previous categories of sales performance drivers in B2B settings, it has also been established that B2B seller skills are the primary ones. In fact, in the sales arena, sales managers in business marketing practice are very much concerned with the identification and understanding of those aspects that drive B2B sellers to be more effective and thus help companies to accomplish their financial goals.

The effect of B2B seller skills on sales performance in B2B is well established in business marketing practice. The predominant strategy in B2B settings implies direct and face-to-face communication with the customers. This study offers an empirical testing of a framework for the identification and understanding of those skills in business marketing practice that sellers need to embrace handling and increasing value in business relationships with customers in B2B settings of tangible products.

This study has focused on seller skills in B2B sales performance. Seller skills are seen as indicators of sales performance in B2B settings. The actual sales performance can be approached through various different measures, such as objective and subjective performance. In business marketing practice, sellers should be evaluated against factors that they can control. It is also important in business marketing practice to maintain the distinction between sellers' non-selling performance and sellers' behavioral performance, as sellers often have to undertake a variety of actions that are not necessarily sales related (e.g. provide information and expense control).

Indicators of B2B sales performance relate commonly to objective and subjective performance measures. Specifically, B2B sales performance could be measured by taking into account: percentage of objective achievement; time needed for the achievement of objectives; and salary increases due to the achievement of objectives. There are also other performance measures related to peers, such as the achievement related to peers' achievements. Additionally, sales performance measures could also relate to the objectives of gaining new accounts and

sales of new products. However, new measures in business marketing practice may focus on the frequency of training employees, number of employees trained annually and amount spent per employee on training annually.

There is also a line of work on new measures linked to the evolution of performance drivers of this study, that are relevant to business marketing practice, such as focusing on the improvement of each of the following: product/technical knowledge; customer knowledge; use of sales technology; ability to modify sales approach; ability to modify sales behavior; presentation skills and communication skills.

We conclude that the seven-dimensional framework of B2B seller skills in the context of sales performance verified in this study offers relevant and valuable insights into business marketing practice. We therefore argue that the reported dimensions of B2B seller skills – i.e. interpersonal presentation and communication skills, degree of adaptiveness regarding abilities to modify sales approach and sales behavior, selling-related knowledge about customers and product/technology knowledge, and sales technology use – offer a sound foundation for assessing and following up on sales performance in business marketing practice.

This study provides a sound foundation for framing relevant indicators of sales performance regarding B2B seller skills in business marketing practice. The seven-dimensional framework therefore provides a foundation in business marketing practice on which to structure the assessment of sales performance in B2B settings.

The empirical focus is on B2B sellers, as well as product-oriented companies. This offers at least two opportunities for further application. One opportunity for further application is to examine the seven-dimensional framework of B2B sellers in services firms. Another may be to assess B2C contexts of sales performance in the market for premium products or services that are commonly expensive (e.g. vehicles) product sales offers and up-market or luxury service-solution offers (e.g. investments and travel arrangements).

The seven-dimensional framework can evidently be applied for further assessment in other business settings, such as similar or different business settings across European countries. It also requires further assessment in non-western business settings, in Africa and Asia, for instance.