The transformation of selling for value co-creation: Antecedents and boundary conditions

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Abstract

The selling practice is facing an unprecedented process of change that is redefining the logic of value co-creation and disrupting the nature of B2B relationships across several industries. This phenomenon is well-known in managerial practice but under-investigated at a theoretical level. Sales literature aligns on acknowledging that selling and value co-creation unfold within broader service ecosystems. However, the changes occurring in sales have been predominantly studied by focusing on the single elements affecting them. Based on a qualitative study of 48 sales experts, this research draws on the service ecosystem theory to offer a holistic perspective of the factors driving the transformation of selling for value co-creation. The proposal from the study is that value co-creation through selling is a systemic and multi-actor phenomenon, including two antecedents: Hybridization of salespeople and Digital ecosystem empowerment, two boundary conditions: Multi-actor integration and Acceleration, and 23 sub-dimensions driving change in selling. The study also provides guidance for managerial practices, which is crucial due to the high failure rate of attempts at transforming sales.

Keywords

Selling theory, sales management, transformation, B2B, business relationships, service ecosystem, service-dominant logic

Introduction

There is consensus that a transformation in selling and sales management is happening across companies operating in different industries. The rapidly evolving business environment is offering

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new opportunities and posing emerging challenges for sales (Corsaro, 2019), generating contexts that are increasingly complex, relationship-intense, and characterized by protracted time frames (Cuevas, 2018). This has implications not only for how value is co-created through dyadic interactions between B2B buyers and sellers (Haas et al., 2012; Rusthollkarhu et al., 2020) but also for the organization and function of the entire ecosystem of which these dyadic relationships are part of (Hartmann et al., 2018).

Several phenomena are contributing to the transformation of selling and sales management practices. On the customer side, we observe increased complexity and length of the purchasing process due in part to the higher number of individuals operating in the buying function who are involved in the decision-making process (Toman et al., 2017). Buyers are more informed than ever about products and services and show a tendency to engage with salespeople only during the last phases of the purchasing process (Singh et al., 2019). Digitalization has then introduced new ways of doing business for many B2B firms and has opened new avenues through which companies can interact in the ecosystem supported by digital platforms. Furthermore, as buyers become more sophisticated (Bolander et al., 2015), an integrated sales approach is required which includes cooperation from various members within the organization (Hughes et al., 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to even more immediate, wide-ranging, and severe challenges for the B2B salesforce (Hartmann and Lussier, 2020), accelerating the change that sales was already facing.

Notwithstanding the changes unfolding in selling practices, scientific research has been observed as rather slow in abandoning a traditional and homogeneous selling conceptualization (Singh et al., 2019) in favor of this wave of transformation. Some scholars criticize existing theories that describe the complexity of such phenomenon. For instance, Ohiomah et al. (2020) state that sales success in B2B is not driven by a few elements but rather by 31 determinants associated with four dimensions of the selling process (i.e., salesperson, organization, customer, and environment). Hughes and Ogilvie (2020) propose a study of the professional selling role in terms of ambidexterity without the restrictions of traditional, firm-centric, and unidirectional assumptions in response to market complexity. Similarly, Cuevas (2018) tracks the transformation of professional selling and isolates some key implications for leading the modern sales organization, declaring the need to reconcile incongruent approaches to managing the salesforce, viewing sales professionals as key enablers of customer relationship development.

Other scholars have conceptualized the role of selling with reference to market shaping and value co-creation. Hartmann et al. (2018) suggest that today's market changes point towards the inadequacy of traditional, restricted, firm-centric, unidirectional, and dyadic views of sales processes that have prevailed until now. The authors firmly state the need for more robust, theoretical foundations that better explain the processes and roles of selling in value co-creation through market exchanges within service ecosystems (Hartmann et al., 2020a). On this point, Ranjan and Friend (2020) explore the conceptual parallels that exist across value co-creation and sales literature and highlight the need for holistic approaches to understanding sales (e.g., Bolander et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2013; Plouffe et al., 2016).

In our study, a service ecosystem perspective is adopted to explain how value co-creation through selling is transforming and to address the following research questions: How is value co-creation changing through selling? What are the antecedents of this change? How is this change influencing value co-creation in service ecosystems? By embracing the service ecosystem logic, selling actors, processes, and activities can be redefined in terms of a broader system of value co-creation. As a result, selling incorporates value co-creation and co-delivery processes into each interaction to accommodate both sales performance and buyer-seller relations in the broader service exchange, generating value for all stakeholders (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Lusch and Webster, 2010; Rapp et al.,

2020b). Selling and value co-creation develop unpredictably overtime and involve multiple actors operating in complex systems (Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Friend and Malshe, 2016; Macdonald et al., 2016; Ranjan and Friend, 2020; Rapp et al., 2017). However, this transition to a holistic and systemic view is still at an early stage in the sales literature (Corsaro, 2022). Through a qualitative study that involves 48 sales professionals who operate in different industries, we propose a model of the transformative role of selling for value co-creation in service ecosystems by investigating the antecedents and mechanisms underlying this change.

Our study contributes to the recent debate on the changing role of selling and overcomes the outdated conception that sales literature considers only interactions between buyers and sellers as the main unit of analysis. We ground our study on the premise that value co-creation is increasingly coordinated through actor-generated institutions and arrangements that reflect multiple stakeholders within the ecosystem (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). We identify two antecedents and two boundary conditions that drive change in selling and analyze them from a holistic and systemic perspective, considering that selling is non-linear in nature and involves many actors, not necessarily only the salespeople, who operate in the service ecosystem (Hartmann et al., 2018; Plouffe et al., 2016). In this way, we contribute to the development of a more comprehensive theory of change in sales and sales management to overcome the micro theoretical focus that is currently common in the field (Cron, 2017; Hartmann et al., 2018). Given that most studies in this area are still theoretical, our work adds empirical evidence that shows how value co-creation through selling is a systematic, multi-actor, and holistic phenomenon while highlighting the transformative role of selling for value co-creation in service ecosystems.

The implications of this study are particularly relevant as investments in the sales function have recently been questioned, and the sustainability of some models has been challenged with the emergence of new channels and technologies (Neslin and Shankar, 2009; Rapp et al., 2017; Sharma and Sheth, 2010). Albeit companies generally acknowledge a need for change in the sales function, they are often puzzled about how to manage and implement such transformation in practice (Helps, 2019). Indeed, too many sales organizations still struggle with performance despite the several efforts put in championing transformation initiatives (Harney et al., 2019), with frequent examples of transformation being doomed to fail without the development of a solid strategic roadmap.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we conduct a review of the evolution and of the forces driving transformation in selling by adopting a systemic and service ecosystem perspective. Next, we provide an overview of our research approach, including a description of our sample and methodology. We then present our findings and discuss the theoretical model of the transformative role of selling in value co-creation, highlighting the factors that enable or prevent transformative selling processes from occurring. We conclude with managerial implications, limitations, and future directions.

Exploring change in business-to-business selling

The nature of professional selling and sales management has profoundly transformed over recent decades resulting in a fundamental redefinition of the role of the salesforce in business to business (Cuevas, 2018). Although salespeople have always played a crucial role in gathering market information and developing competitive intelligence (Haas et al., 2012), the recent acceleration of change processes has led established salespeople to adapt quickly (Lacoste, 2018). Among the reasons for such change is the higher complexity and sophistication in the buying decision-making process (Arli et al., 2018; Lim, 2020). Today, customers have more power than ever, due to information availability and increasing market transparency (Homburg et al., 2009; Rapp et al., 2014).

At the same time, they face an information overload having to deal with many simultaneous offerings, often received through multiple channels, and which can be difficult to evaluate. Furthermore, buyers tend to dedicate less time to salespeople, who are encouraged to find new ways to engage customers (Corsaro and Maggioni, 2021).

Change in the selling practice is also due to a pervasive transformation of many companies' business models (Schmitz and Ganesan, 2014). For instance, the servitization process is guiding several companies towards adding a structured service offer to products and increasingly converting their products according to a value-in-use logic founded on value-based selling (Kienzler et al., 2019; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015). Literature has also widely discussed the role of digital technologies in disrupting established sales practices and upturning prominent sales theories (Grove et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2019), offering several opportunities to make the selling process smarter (Brodie et al., 2019; Fehrer et al., 2018). Singh et al. (2019) reveal that the influence of sales digitalization technologies, especially artificial intelligence, is likely to be more significant and more far-reaching than previous sales technologies. The application of advanced analytics and machine learning to mine rich datasets can increase the power of sales data that is integrated at individual and department (or team/branch) levels with other external sources such as customer feedback, product, and market data (Vera-Baquero et al., 2016). Ray et al. (2020) indicated that customers are increasingly showing a preference towards remote technology-mediated communication, like live chats with supplier organizations, when self-service could not meet their needs.

Another stream of research deals with changes in sales management practices involving intra-organizational challenges and opportunities to enhance salespeople's performance (Plouffe, 2018; Plouffe and Barclay, 2007) giving rise to what has been defined as "the intra-organizational dimension of the sales role" (IDSR). Steward et al. (2010) highlight how top sales performers better coordinate expertise across different functions resulting in a more central role of the salesforce for all departments and their customers' buying organizations. Because of the multiplicity of environmental changes occurring in markets, Plouffe et al. (2013, 2018) posit that sales organizations are required to adjust their sales approach and strategies. Nonetheless, recent literature has primarily analyzed single aspects of the change occurring in sales, such as the evolution of sales orientations, with the increase in customer-focused salespeople and consultative selling agents (Arnett and Badrinarayanan, 2005), and new emerging sales competencies (Lacoste, 2018).

Applying a service ecosystem lens to understanding transformation in selling and value co-creation

A long-standing debate lingers regarding the extent to which salespeople participate in and contribute to value creation and co-creation (e.g., Schmitz and Ganesan, 2014; Sheth and Sharma, 2008). Originally, the contribution of selling for value creation was conceptualized in terms of benefits and sacrifices with the sales department being able to create value by either generating additional benefits or reducing the cost of the benefits they already provided (De Vincentis and Rackham, 1998). Dixon and Tanner (2012: 10) defines selling as "the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations to bring about economic exchange in a value-creation context," while Haas et al. (2012) adopts an interactive view and identifies four features of value-creating processes in buyer-seller relationships: jointness, balanced-initiative, interacted-value, and socio-cognitive construction. More recently, Rangarajan et al. (2020) clarify the value-adding contributions of an adaptive and hybrid salesforce and suggest what changes need to happen at each stage of the B2B sales funnel and related decision-making processes.

However, most studies focus primarily on single aspects of value co-creation and analyze dyadic buyer-seller interactions, while the transformation of the selling practice spans the entire service ecosystem and thus requires high-level lenses to holistically understand the phenomenon. Despite the powerful implications of an ecosystem perspective, most research and practice contributions continue to focus on individual and dyadic relational units, overlooking how these elements operate within a complex system with combined and synergistic effects (Hartmann et al., 2020b).

More recently, sales theories increasingly recognize that the selling role no longer refers to a one-sided approach to persuading a buyer and exchanging a product or service (Hartmann et al., 2018; Wengler et al., 2001). The selling model has shifted to embrace dynamic and multidirectional interactions between the buying and selling firm to improve relationships through concomitant value creation (Sheth and Sharma, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). With respect to this, scholars state that sales are increasingly transforming into a customer-facing profession that involves several actors (e.g., salesperson, sales manager, customer, channel intermediaries, and regulators) who impact one another through co-creative practices within an ecosystem. These actors work simultaneously with several intra-firm functions in their selling and value creation endeavors to holistically match today's complex buying processes. Under this perspective, selling actors, processes, and activities can be redefined in terms of the broader system of value creation in which the exchange occurs as it increases the range of activities and the number of actors involved in the selling process (Hartmann et al., 2018).

This shift towards a more system-oriented view of market exchange (Giesler, 2018) affects the interpretation of selling itself. Considered together, the literature appears to acknowledge a need for a "revised perspective" (MacInnis, 2011) that accounts for the multidirectional nature of sales processes and aims at explaining how these processes develop within complex, dynamic exchange systems of value creation. Previous work on S-D logic suggests that multiple stakeholders, including sellers and customers, can take on many roles and enact a multitude of practices that contribute to value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2011). Ulaga and Kohli (2018) recently called for further examination of salespeople who "orchestrate" internal and external actors in ways that effectively reduce various uncertainties. Tomorrow's selling processes are likely to be collaborative endeavors where sales personnel are expected to work hand-in-hand with multiple ecosystem partners to orchestrate complex sales solutions (Cron et al., 2014; Vargo and Lusch, 2016) and continually create value in their ongoing communication with a myriad of stakeholders by accessing, disseminating, and ultimately integrating knowledge (Wang et al., 2020).

The S-D logic recognizes the importance and relevance of multiple actors in selling, including policymakers and various stakeholders who are involved, directly or indirectly. The diversity of actors means that there will also be diversity in the way actors offer value and seek value, and in how mutual value creation shapes an ecosystem (Corsaro and Mattsson, 2018). In this context, a deeper understanding of the factors driving change in the selling and sales management practice for value co-creation in service ecosystems is still needed. Particular attention should also be dedicated to identifying the boundary conditions which can facilitate or limit the transformation of selling for value co-creation with the goal of creating a holistic theoretical framework of this phenomenon. The identification of boundary conditions is critical as they could influence the strength or direction of relationships among antecedents and outcome variables or act as a mechanism to explain why a specific relationship exists (Rapp et al., 2020a).

Methodology

To explore the antecedent of change in value co-creation through selling, we conducted a qualitative study, which was deemed appropriate given the limited development of a theory on the topic (Gioia et al., 2013; Johnson, 2015, 2020). We studied the experience of 48 sales experts covering 28 sectors and explored how their companies are experiencing the evolution of the sales function applying a grounded theory research design. Through grounded theory and theories-in-use approach (Zeithaml et al., 2020), we aimed to construct an organic theory of the transformative role of selling in value co-creation by analyzing the underlying processes and interactions shaped by the views of multiple actors (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Johnson, 2015) and develop qualitative propositions to guide future research in this area (Johnson, 2020). We adopted the Straussian tradition to identify the underlying dimensions driving the change in selling and demarcate a range of properties to separate different concepts (Mello and Flint, 2009; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In addition, we applied a theories-in-use approach to take advantage of the experiences and knowledge of sales professionals and identifying relevant constructs that reflect the changes occurring in sales practice, their antecedents, and implications for value co-creation (Zeithaml et al., 2020).

Data collection. We collected our data in 2019 and conducted a follow-up in 2020. This study combines primary and secondary data sources to generate insights and shape future inquiries (Table 1).

The primary data collection stage was informed by a preliminary phase of retrieval and analysis of secondary data available through reports, business presentations, and attendance of relevant industry events. In this preliminary phase, we developed an overall perception of the transformation phenomena occurring in the sales function and we set the scene for an open discussion with sales experts. To deepen our preliminary insights, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with sales directors in 2019, followed by an additional 12 interviews in early 2020. Each interview lasted

Table 1. Data sources and applications.

Data source	Type of data	Applications
Business documents	Business reports, business presentations, and business event attendance (2019–2020)	Gaining familiarity with the transformation occurring in the sales field and open the discussion on the topic with experts
Interviews	First round (2019) Interviews of 20 sales experts (16 h). Profiles detailed in Table 2, #1 to #20	Gaining insights into the sales transformation process
	Second round (2020) Interviews of 12 sales experts (9 h). Profiles detailed in Table 2, #21 to #33	Strengthening data analysis and expanding evidence base investigating the dimensions of sales transformation
Focus groups	2 Focus groups (2019–2020) Total of 16 sales experts (3 h). Profiles detailed in Table 2, #34 to #48	Validating and expanding the insights obtained through the interviews
Direct observation	Field visits (2019–2020) 4 company visits in 2020, including participation in meetings with team members. 1 industry event organized in collaboration with a global consultancy firm	Confirming the interpretation of interview and focus group data; gaining further insights into ad hoc behavior

between 40 and 60 min for a total of 25 h. To validate and complement the insights obtained through the interviews, we conducted two focus groups involving 16 sales experts and professionals. Each focus group lasted 1.5 h. The audio recordings of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed to allow for coding and analysis.

We applied a purposeful and snowball sampling approach (Johnson, 2015) to identify and select information-rich individuals with intimate and extensive knowledge relevant to the research questions to inform the research process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Participants were recruited on LinkedIn and personal contacts of the researchers. We then asked for referrals to other potential subjects, who were invited to participate in the research. We were thus able to identify common perceptions and experiences, while at the same time, maximizing differences to obtain a multi-faceted perspective and understand potential boundary conditions and theory nuances (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Glaser and Strauss, 2009).

Participant profiles are presented in Table 2. Most participants held a sales director position in leading companies and were selected because they combined a holistic and strategic view with the provision of key insights on the implications for sales executives and salespeople within their teams (Ivanova-Gongne and Törnroos, 2017). To account for diversity, we ensured some variation in terms of gender and years of experience in the sales function.

We briefed interviewees about the academic nature of the study and reassured them regarding the anonymous treatment of their personal and company-related information to encourage information sharing. Participants shared their experiences following a semi-structured interview protocol, including a series of open and probing questions (Appendix A). After a brief introduction of their profile and professional experience, participants were introduced to the topic of changing selling practices and asked about the meaning and the nature of this phenomenon within their organizations. Following the recommendations of Zeithaml et al. (2020), the interviews proceeded with a retrospective exercise asking participants to reflect on key changes that had affected their sales departments and functions over the past 5 years. As a result, a series of themes and antecedents of the transformative role of selling in value co-creation were identified and further discussed, with probing questions aimed at uncovering challenges, opportunities, and coping mechanisms characterizing such transformation in their organizations. Particular focus was placed on discussing the relevance and interactions of the human and the technological aspects, the interaction between multiple actors, and the policies introduced by the organization to keep pace with an ever-changing sales and business environment.

During the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions, participants shared several anecdotes of specific events. These were deemed critical for accessing knowledge related to the structuring of social action-in-time, with the opportunity to connect processes to spatial and temporal settings (Halinen et al., 2013) and deliver a deeper understanding of the changes over time and after the discussed events (Beeler et al., 2017).

The data collection was complemented by four field visits to sales departments and sales consultancy firms, and by the organization of an event in collaboration with a global consultancy firm to share preliminary insights and spark debate. In this final stage, we had the opportunity to confirm the interpretation of interview and focus group data and gain further insights into ad-hoc behavior.

Data analysis. Our data analysis relied on the analytical procedures developed by Gioia et al. (2013) and the recommendations of Johnson (2015) and Johnson (2020) to perform qualitative research and apply grounded theory designs to sales research. Our analyses include three key steps to ensure that empirical observations are linked to existing theoretical concepts and develop new insights

Table 2. Participant profiles.

#	Job position	Gender	Seniority (in years)	Industry
1	Sales director	Male	20	Pressure and temperature instruments
2	Sales director	Male	8	Pharmaceutical
3	Business development	Female	10	Consultancy
4	Sales director	Male	15	Fitness equipment
5	Sales director	Female	25	Classification and certification services
6	Sales director	Male	18	Packaging and printing
7	Sales director	Male	17	Beverage
8	Sales director	Male	12	Medical equipment
9	Sales director	Female	10	CRM solution provider
10	Sales director	Male	8	Cloud computing
11	Sales director	Male	14	Market research
12	Sales director	Female	10	Consultancy
13	Sales director	Male	20	Co-working spaces
14	Sales director	Female	8	Coffee equipment manufacturer
15	Sales director	Male	12	Pharmaceutical
16	Sales director	Female	15	Food and beverage
17	Sales director	Female	4	Beauty
18	Sales director	Male	5	Travel
19	Sales director	Male	7	Consultancy
20	Area manager	Female	7	Banking
21	Sales director	Female	8	Beverage—coffee
22	Sales director	Male	6	Rolling element bearings
23	Key account manager	Male	7	Advertising
24	Sales director	Female	15	Food
25	Sales director	Male	9	Publishing
26	Sales director	Female	7	Beverage—alcoholic drinks
27	Sales director	Male	12	Fashion
28	Key account manager	Male	14	Vending machines
29	Sales director	Male	14	Business travel solutions
30	Sales director	Female	5	Food
31	Sales specialist	Female	7	Fashion
32	Sales manager	Female	5	Fashion
33	Sales director	Female	6	Hospitality
34	Sales director	Male	8	Healthcare
35	Branch manager	Female	5	Banking
36	Area manager	Male	7	Banking
37	Sales coach	Female	12	Training and coaching
38	Sales director	Female	8	Publishing
39	Sales director	Female	13	Food
40	Key account manager	Male	6	Art and graphics
41	Key account manager	Female	15	ICT security
42	Sales director	Female	5	Baby products
43	Sales director	Male	3	Advertising
44	Area manager	Female	15	Pharmaceutical

Table 2. (continued)

#	Job position	Gender	Seniority (in years)	Industry
45	Sales manager	Male	6	Food and beverage
46	Sales director	Female	8	Travel
47	Key account manager	Male	7	Food and beverage
48	Key account manager	Female	12	Fitness equipment
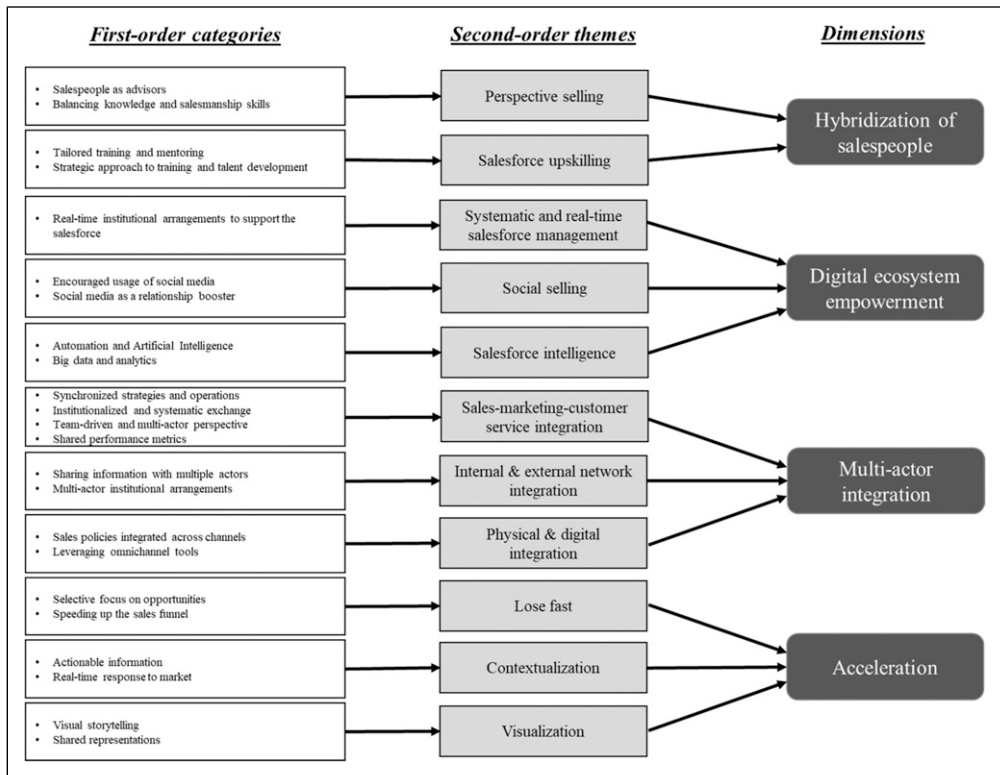
Figure 1. Coding structure.

([Johnson, 2015](#)). The coding process was conducted using QDA Miner software. [Figure 1](#) illustrates our final coding structure.

Step 1. *Open coding.* We created a list of elements, events, and practices in the sales process, which came from the narratives and evidence obtained from all the sources in our study. The identification of these categories was discussed among the researchers to ensure consistency. Each round of interviews was followed by an open-coding process ([Johnson, 2015](#); [Strauss and Corbin, 1998](#)) in which we assigned all meaningful quotations to the identified categories of information through the in-vivo coding practice ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)). For instance, we used the code "selling solutions" to synthesize *"We promote a selling approach strongly oriented towards the identification of problems*

and proposal of solutions" (#42). We then merged similar codes and developed the 23 first-order categories so that they mirror our informants' "concepts-in-use" (Gephart, 2004). For example, the codes "selling solutions" and "adopting customer's point of view" were combined into the first-order category "salespeople as advisors."

Step 2. *Axial coding.* In this step, we analyzed the open codes to uncover the core phenomenon and the categories influencing it, including the different strategies proposed by companies and contextual conditions shaping such strategies (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In this process, we went back and forth between data and existing theory, trying to link emerging themes to prior literature (Gioia et al., 2013). Next, we proceeded with clustering conceptually overlapping or complementary first-order categories into second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013) that represented key elements of the practices through which sales managers characterize and face this transformation phenomenon. For example, we clustered the first-order categories "salespeople as advisors," and "balancing knowledge and salesmanship skills" into the second-order theme "perspective selling" as they both reflect the new sales orientation of salespeople in co-creating value for the service ecosystem.

Step 3. *Selective coding and grounded model development.* In the last step, we applied selective coding to unify the second-order themes around core categories and further explicate them with descriptive detail to integrate and connect the codes and create an articulated theory (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Gioia et al., 2013; Johnson, 2015). We matched the second-order themes with the theoretical predictions and insights derived through the research and reiterated such processes until we were able to develop stable aggregate dimensions at a higher level of theoretical abstraction. For instance, the second-order themes "perspective selling" and "salesforce up-skilling" were aggregated into the higher-order dimension "hybridization of salespeople" as they reflect how the salesforce is transforming and increasing the value co-created in the service ecosystem. In addition to the second confirmatory round, we worked to protect the "trustworthiness" of our insights (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) by using multiple data sources, triangulating them, and asking a subset of our interviewees to review the transcripts to confirm the closeness of their wording with our final coding structure. Specifically, we established the credibility of our results through prolonged engagement and persistent observation having spent over 2 years collecting data, interacting with sales directors and executives, and being exposed to multiple influences that affected the transformation of selling. Transferability of results was achieved by providing rich descriptions of the identified dimensions so that findings could be transferred to other contexts. The criteria of dependability and confirmability were satisfied through an external audit performed by a third researcher who was not originally involved in the study and confirmed that findings and their interpretations were accurate and supported by the collected data.

Findings

The transformation of selling. The changes occurring in sales were discussed as complex and multifaceted phenomena by all the interviewees. The root cause of this phenomenon of change lies in the sophistication of business customers' needs, with a predominant focus on perceived value over price. Nevertheless, customers continue looking for trusted advisors instead of traditional suppliers, creating higher expectations in terms of service level, problem-solving, and solution delivery and shifting the core of value co-creation to a value-in-use logic and value-based selling (Kienzler et al., 2019; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015). The transformation of selling is leading salespeople, who have acknowledged this phenomenon as entailing contextual changes across space and

time-related dimensions, to find new models to interact with their customers and develop tailored approaches.

Sales professionals identified a series of practices and phenomena that shape, enable, or prevent the transformation of sales. These phenomena could be ascribed to two antecedent and two boundary conditions that describe how change is unfolding and impacting value co-creation in current markets: Hybridization of salespeople, Digital ecosystem empowerment, Multi-actor integration processes, and Acceleration processes.

The transformation of selling for value co-creation was commonly identified as originating in the interaction and exchange between humans and technology. The blend between these two components shapes the changes occurring within organizations and enhances the transformative power of sales for value co-creation and leads to transformative blends that foster value co-creation by increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the sales function and its contribution to the broader service ecosystem. In addition, two boundary conditions of the interaction between human and technological components (multi-actor integration and acceleration) act as enablers of the sales transformation phenomenon by aligning and coordinating companies' resources considering the pace and context of selling interactions and adapting actions in real-time. Figure 2 presents the proposed framework, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Hybridization of salespeople. The first dimension arising from the discussion with sales professionals is how the transformation is driven by the value generated through human capital. Interviewees agree that over recent years, selling strategies have been affected by profound changes particularly related to how salespeople approach and manage the relationship with their customers. Evidence supports the idea that sales professionals are increasingly showing hybrid profiles that bridge analytical with creative skills, as well as a deep knowledge of the offer with solid problem-solving capabilities. This hybridization is broadening the skills and capabilities required of salespeople to successfully address market needs and leverage opportunities, and in turn, co-create value in the service ecosystem in a more effective way.
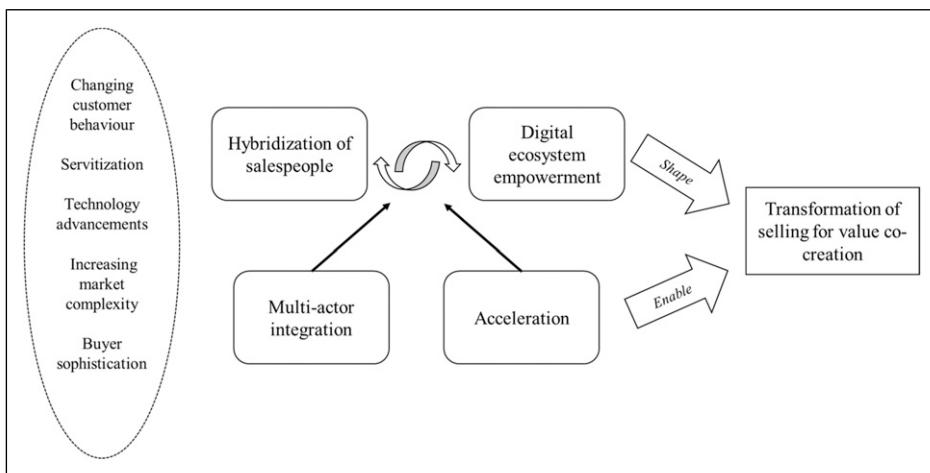

Figure 2. A grounded model of the transformation of selling for value co-creation.

> *"Our salespeople are developing into hybrid profiles. Half analytical, particularly knowledgeable about the products they sell, and half creative with a marked ability for problem-solving and empathy"* (#32).

Most participants state that the sphere of influence and role of sales is broadening inside and outside of the organization. This evolution requires a systemic and multi-actor perspective to be managed. Participants also highlight potential downturns if salespeople are not adequately supported by their organization and team as this could lead to a loss of focus on value co-creation activities.

> *"Salespeople are currently suffering from the Jekyll and Hyde syndrome. They are often required to juggle between account management and business development. Our job is multifaceted, and we need to be versatile"* (#26).

Thus, we conceptualize the hybridization of salespeople as the broadened and blurred role played by salespeople in co-creating value in service ecosystems through new capabilities and a selling orientation that is based on translating customers' perspectives and becoming solution providers, offering unique selling propositions. We identified two areas representing practices that are driving change and hybridizing the role of salespeople within the service ecosystem: (1) perspective selling and (2) salesforce up-skilling (see Appendix B for selected quotes).

Perspective selling: The first aspect highlighted by the informants is the evolving selling approach of salespeople. Today the selling approach must be more customized and versatile, depending on the different contexts and networks in which a salesperson operates. The narrow buyer-seller dyad is challenged by this orientation as it suggests value is co-created within a complex system of actors, where the contribution of a salesperson is highly adjustable and adaptable to the network in which they interact. The actions and activities of salespeople are changing and evolving. Their sales approach is required to smoothly and flawlessly adapt to the context and the multi-actor network with whom they co-create value. We, therefore, define perspective selling as a selling approach that establishes meaningful and long-lasting relationships with the stakeholders in the ecosystem by leveraging the adaptability and flexibility of salespeople who act as solution providers and offer unique selling propositions by becoming part of the stakeholders' world. Perspective selling is based on two practices that characterize sales in highly transformative companies. First, the selling approach is moving towards a tailored approach focused on delivering problem-based solutions and working together with multiple actors in the service ecosystem to co-create value. This highly customized and solution-driven approach has a long-term focus and arises from customers wanting to feel unique and looking for salespeople who offer long-lasting benefits that exceed the transactional value of the product or service sold. This transformation results in thin boundaries between the role of salespeople and of consultants. Participants pointed out that in the future, the borderline between selling and consultancy will progressively blur with selling being centered on building and maintaining relationships in addition to generating transactional value. Salespeople are acting as advisors by demonstrating a constructive attitude and willingness to actively contribute to solving clients' issues, shifting their selling approach towards the identification of problems and proposal of solutions and offering a unique selling proposition by becoming part of the customers' world. The transformation of value co-creation through sales is beneficial when sales leaders focus on the best solution, regardless of past and consolidated practices, and stand up for their ideas without passively accepting solutions perceived as wrong or not optimal, and passionately advise their customers. This fosters healthy and productive relationships with all actors in the service ecosystem. This is the basis of perspective selling which places salespeople inside the customers'

ecosystem, with the goal of contributing to the customers' success rather than limiting themselves to simply persuading the customer.

> *"Business customers and particularly people in general have been damaged by the economic downturn, so they do not need to be challenged as much as in the past. A sales approach that is too aggressive can even damage the relationship. I always try to think as if I were the customer and to feel their sore points"* (#41).

In this context, balancing knowledge and salesmanship skills is of critical importance. Both hard and soft sales skills were identified as critical in shaping relationships within the ecosystem and co-creating value with multiple actors. Salesmanship skills help salespeople become agents of change and generate new thinking patterns while offering insights that challenge the status quo. The soft side of selling though requires a deep understanding of the service ecosystem and its multiple actors. By building such knowledge and combining it with salesmanship skills, it is possible to create new avenues for value co-creation, which must always take into account the context (Vargo and Lusch, 2014).

> *"Somehow I move along a line where I can exert, or try to exert, the charisma of a 'one-man show' in some situations and be as precise as an engineer in others. How is it possible to demonstrate the value to customers if I do not understand the way their numbers work?"* (#12).

Salespeople are required to have a flexible and adaptable mindset and to be willing to adapt to continuously evolving contexts leveraging technology and balancing their technical knowledge with selling skills and empathy. Relational skills and empathy become critical to align a salesperson's decision-making style with that of the other actors to increase the probability of success. In addition, salespeople are required to align and understand the decision-making style of multiple actors, which has critical implications when it comes to reducing procrastination during negotiations. They also represent an essential condition to developing long-term relationships and co-create value based on mutual trust and empathy. The development of empathy has been shown to have positive effects on customer-oriented behaviors, ability to communicate and commitment to the salesperson (Delpechitre et al., 2019). Our findings support this perspective as participants agree on the fact that empathy plays a crucial role in gaining clients' trust beyond established technical knowledge. In summary, transversal skills and horizontal skills are effective in perspective selling as they allow salespeople to think outside the box and contribute to value co-creation in innovative ways that break established practices, and this is particularly evident when salespeople have previous experiences in unrelated sectors.

> *"When they join from a different sector, salespeople are more open-minded and willing to question clients. They have a clean mind. This allows them to work together on projects without any filter, preconception, or prejudice"* (#26).

Salesforce up-skilling: The second aspect that contributes to the hybridization of the salesforce is related to training and career development opportunities. Salesforce up-skilling describes a tailored approach to continuously training and mentoring the salesforce with the objective of strategically developing talents and boosting value co-creation through sales. Recent contributions have stressed the critical role of continuous training to equip the salesforce with the latest technologies along with a renovated set of skills to enhance both efficacy and performance (Rayburn et al., 2021; Singh et al.,

2019). Highly transformative organizations significantly invest in the development of their salesforce constantly with a specific focus on customization, highlighting training as a differentiation factor from competitors and creating coaching programs tailored to the individual salesperson's needs and performance outcomes with a specific focus on the emotional sphere and soft skills. This strategic approach to training celebrates salespeople's individuality through continuous learning and dedicated coaching.

> *"We adapt coaching activities based on personal interviews and set individual KPIs we can derive from the CRM. For instance, if a salesman tends to lose deals in the final phases, maybe he has a problem in dealing with anxiety"* (#19).

Digital ecosystem empowerment. Digital technologies are affecting the transformation processes occurring in sales. Participants identified the application of new technologies in modern selling environments as a catalyst for transforming value co-creation through sales. Looking at the future, they believe that the current selling approach will be revolutionized in the near future.

> *"In ten years, there will be a completely new model of selling. Everything will become much more interconnected, and it will be impossible to do business without the support of technology"* (#38).

At the same time, technology is seen as an enabler and facilitator of value co-creation processes in service ecosystems. A balanced approach between human and digital elements is recommended, as the general perception is that markets will not shift completely into digital sales. And salespeople's empathy will remain key in selling. Digital ecosystem empowerment is defined as the set of digital applications and institutional arrangements that act as agents of change shaping value co-creation through selling by disrupting the status quo of the sales function and includes (1) Systematic and Real-time Salesforce Management, (2) Social Selling, and (3) Salesforce Intelligence (see Appendix B for selected quotes).

Systematic and real-time salesforce management: Systematic and real-time salesforce management is defined as the totality of institutional arrangements that are deployed to support the exchange between actors and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of value co-creation through sales in the service ecosystem. These institutional arrangements are identified as critical to customer engagement and creating opportunities for different actors in the ecosystem. From an operational perspective, these institutional arrangements translate into interfaces that are easy-to-use for the salesforce, can geolocate salespeople and better organize their activities, and provide real-time data to enhance sales processes and effectiveness. This intelligence activity is deployed through a team effort and with a focus on multiple actors.

"*The technological infrastructure is critical to customer engagement and creates opportunities with the different actors of the supply chain. We have an interface that is easy to use for our salesforce and provide real-time data*" (#36).

Social Selling: Social media applications are increasing in B2B and dedicated strategies are developed focusing on different platforms (Kumar and Sharma, 2022). These platforms and applications are critically relevant for lead generation and for the identification of new business opportunities. Social selling is defined as a professional selling approach "predicated on the strength of social media allies within a social enterprise, emphasizing salespeople's use of social interaction-enhancing platforms for content-creation, and networking" (Ancillai et al., 2019: 293). The discussion with our key informants also delved into how social media usage is encouraged by companies as B2B buyers tend to gather information and refer to social media as consumers do.

Social media is changing the way ecosystem relationships are developed and reducing cold calls: reaching out to possible buyers on social media platforms is a widespread approach and social media activities increase brand visibility and popularity. Specific social media outlets, such as LinkedIn, have been discussed as an evolution of the approach to people. More advanced applications involve the analysis of clients' behavior over time to qualify leads with a longitudinal perspective. Through social selling, salespeople can also convey tailored promotional messages and connect with prospects and existing customers, establishing a personal connection and maintaining relationships without an aggressive presence typical of a two-way communication with clients (Chaker et al., 2022). Social media is also contributing to the transformation of sales by re-shaping the way relationships within the service ecosystem are developed involving multiple actors simultaneously with dedicated content.

> *"We are an integral part of our customers' social media world. Thanks to the information we have, we also provide support to our customers through social media. We verify what customers do in the social media sphere and develop tailored solution to address their needs"* (#4).

Salesforce Intelligence: Intelligence applications represent one of the major driving forces of the transformation of selling in organizations. Salesforce intelligence describes the development and application of business intelligence systems such as automation, artificial intelligence, and big data analytics to sales management with the focus of facilitating value co-creation through selling in the service ecosystem. Participants underlined that the role of salesforce intelligence should not be confined to the sales and marketing areas; however, the intelligence activity should be part of the DNA of the sales function and not be seen as only a sporadic ex-post activity made undertaken as a consequence of specific events or issues. With salesforce intelligence, organizations create new institutions that enable more comprehensive, effective, and efficient management of relationships with multiple actors.

"*Today a correct implementation of sales intelligence is a must not only for companies but also in the non-for-profit [sectors]. Every organization needs to interact with their users and stakeholders to generate a unique and seamless experience*" (#34).

The increasing volume and variety of data are transforming the way information indexing and platforms are designed and implemented. Platforms powered by artificial intelligence are becoming increasingly common, particularly in sales prospecting and allow to identify up-selling and cross-selling opportunities.

> *"Information is so vast that it is not possible for humans to cognitively process everything. What we need is to simplify such complexity and machines can play a key role, suggesting to both sales and customer service people what the best actions to be pursued are with a customer or potential lead"* (#16).

Although key informants commented on the fear that sales intelligence could potentially replace or reduce the role of salespeople within the company, intelligence, and automation are seen as opportunities to improve time management and reduce daily tasks, allowing for more focus on developing relationships with multiple actors and co-create value. Artificial intelligence applications automate several activities, improving the efficiency of salespeople, and automated systems allow to reduce the time allocated to routine activities that could negatively impact selling time and can potentially to a fully automated selling process for some specific segments.

"*Based on our segmentation, we have certain customers who need the presence of a commercial associate, while the sale with other customers can be completely automated*" (#28).

The amount of data constantly increases, becoming more sophisticated, articulated, and generated at an unceasing pace. In such a complex data environment, key informants highlighted the crucial role played by Big Data analytics in generating new and unique insights. For many companies, the introduction of big data analytics has meant rethinking their sales model to embed and leverage the extensive amount of data and information available through new applications of CRM systems. These systems are set to interact with multiple sources of data, including social media, and use artificial intelligence to generate insights and formulate customized recommendations. Future predictions point to salesforce intelligence systems providing product recommendations, automating communication and daily administrative tasks in a seamless and effective way.

Multi-actor integration

The process of integration was commonly identified as a pacesetter for the transformation occurring in sales and affecting value co-creation in service ecosystems. Participants generally agree on the fact that the integration process occurs at different levels, involves multiple actors operating internally and externally to the company, and belong to the same service ecosystem. Although the benefits of integration were widely acknowledged, several interviewees pointed out that the creation and management of institutions to foster integration and collaboration within the ecosystem pose several challenges to organizations.

> "*The real problem is that in theory, there are associations and consortiums, but in reality, collaboration and integration across companies are very limited. Everyone is concentrated on their own business*" (#2).

We conceptualize the multi-actor integration process as institutional arrangements that promote value co-creation through selling by increasing the alignment and coordination among (1) sales, marketing, and customer service departments, (2) internal and external networks, and (3) online and offline channels (see Appendix B for selected quotes).

Sales–marketing–customer service integration: The integration process starts within the organization with the alignment and increased coordination and collaboration among multiple actors operating across different business functions adopting a common strategy towards value co-creation. We define this dimension as sales–marketing–customer service integration. Key informants indicated as a primary level of integration, the one involving company sales, marketing, and customer service departments. Due to an increase in the sophistication of customers' needs and the emergence of new customer journeys that blend online and offline environments, a compelling need for deeper and more structured collaborations among these departments was observed.

> "*Sales and marketing are usually quite focused on their objectives but finding the time to collaborate allows us to make a qualitative leap to reach the most important goals*" (#27).

The orchestration of sales involves a variety of actors inside and outside the organization. These profiles are not necessarily operating within the sales function but actively contribute to the sales activity. Participants highlighted how several sales processes are managed with a team-based perspective that involves different departments while being coordinated by the sales function. This broadens the perspective and influence of sales and results in blurring boundaries between the different actors involved in these processes. We have also observed that the organizations who are

transforming the sales function are rethinking their organizational structure and have moved to a non-hierarchical structure that promotes and rewards the autonomy of each salesperson within the team. Such innovativeness in the organizational structure has been proven to be rewarding and results in sales growth (Groza et al., 2021) This integration occurs at a strategic level, in terms of shared visions and goals, and at an operational level, with shared information, systematic communication, and joint KPIs among departments that allow alignment and continuous exchange regarding value co-creation strategies. To effectively implement this integration, companies establish new institutions that regulate the exchange among these functions and foster joint creation of value.

> "Every sales campaign is always built around those products which have been more promoted and vice versa; advertising campaigns are developed starting from our sales targets. Marketing drives sales and makes sure that both strategies align" (#27).

This integration is confirmed by a joint evaluation of performance and achievements of common goals, possibly thanks to shared KPIs. Participants highlight the benefit of joint KPIs such as number of leads and redemption rates that allow the evaluation of joint actions conducted across departments, fostering the sense of collaboration. In addition, the integration between these departments needs to then be supported by a strong corporate culture and by continuous messaging within the organizations and towards the network stakeholders.

Internal and external network integration: Internal and external network integration implies a novel approach to collaboration that stems from the relational complexity that digitalization has generated and leads sales teams to transform value co-creation by building a stronger ecosystem, more effective cross-channel interactions, and immediate engagement. Although the general perception is that employees, partners, and customers can potentially be connected through social, mobile and cloud, many organizations are still struggling with sharing information with other actors. In most advanced organizations and service ecosystems, this integration is enabled by institutional arrangements that ensure broad access to tools and resources that allow them to co-create value with other actors, develop a shared vision of the network, put on the table what each sale can bring in terms of relational value, align languages, and create formal meeting opportunities to share experiences and knowledge. Within these arrangements, the role of CRM is critical to promote new forms of interaction between the salesforce, channel partners, and other actors within the broader inter-organizational network to provide predictive and prescriptive insights. Such insights are derived from the integration of internal and external data which are delivered in real-time thanks to social platforms and dashboards.

> "Think about the large investment in sustainability. On one hand, we invest a lot of money to make our coffee value chain traceable and to communicate our brand value. On the other hand, are our salespeople including such values in their communication and sales proposition? The answer is 'no, they aren't'" (#21).

Industrial convergence has also contributed to generating the need to extend the boundaries of the service ecosystem and the perspective of salespeople which requires a better alignment across functions and in the broader company network.

"We moved from selling beauty products to selling cosmeceuticals, nutraceuticals, and beauty treatment machinery. Commercial figures do not know how to offer products that are the result of sectoral convergence, a new storytelling is needed" (#17).

Physical and digital integration: The customer journey has evolved to embrace both online and offline channels. Physical and digital integration defines the increasing degree of offline and online channel integration to co-create value through sales in the service ecosystem. Although many companies claim to have developed an omnichannel strategy, the complete integration of the activities across online and offline channel is far from being achieved. Participants highlight how integrated sales policies across online and offline channels are fundamental to obtaining a holistic view, managing complexity, and creating seamless journeys. However, the physical and digital integration requires dedicated tools that are implemented by companies such as shared dashboards and systems integrating information flows coming from the different channels through which a company interacts with their customers.

Acceleration. We define acceleration as the increased pace of processes, activities, and events in business markets that deeply influence and change the activities of the salesforce. Acceleration is pervasive within the service ecosystem and refers to three main processes: (1) lose fast, (2) contextualization, and (3) visualization (see Appendix B for extended quotes).

Lose fast: Lose fast is defined as the ability to speed up the sales funnel with a selective focus on the most promising opportunities to optimize value co-creation through selling and concentrate resources on high-potential deals. As time is a scarce resource, there is a general acknowledgment that some potential deals are lost based on past experiences and historical data. This approach allows the identification of less likely opportunities and concentrates resources on more appealing deals. The use of LinkedIn has dramatically grown in recent years, with many managers drawing benefits from lead generation campaigns. However, as the portfolio of contacts exponentially increases, the management of the sales funnel for each lead becomes more challenging and time-consuming. Thus, salespeople engage in planned strategies to transmit to the customer a sense of urgency, pushing them to make decisions and avoid postponements regardless of the outcome.

"You have to go fast, which does not mean 'I do not have a strategy', but simply moving quickly to the next step. Some colleagues procrastinate with calling prospects because they are scared of a no answer" (#17).

We define this phenomenon as "Lose fast," which reflects the commonly experienced issue of business proposals remaining in a "no decision" status, which has been estimated to generate losses higher than the proportion of deals won by competing companies.

Contextualization: Contextualization denotes the opportunity of having real-time information available to address customers' needs and market changes and accelerate value co-creation through selling. Data and information are collected continuously but they are of little use unless they are put into context and made actionable. Contextualization is achieved through the adoption of mobile devices that simplify and make sales activities and interactions with multiple actors in the ecosystem more immediate. This perspective allows for a quicker response to the changes occurring in the business environment and increases the efficiency of the time-to-market. Artificial intelligence applications are also boosting real-time integration. Chatbots are commonly discussed by participants as a key means through which they can effectively and timely react to customers' needs and queries.

"*Chatbots allow us to respond to customers in real-time, 24/7. Even if we are in B2B, many questions are coming from customers about administrative issues or product features that do not need interaction with a person to be answered*" (#46).

In addition, the role of CRM is of critical importance with its integration with mobile platforms.

Visualization: The last aspect increasing the pace of transformation in sales is related to the emerging role of the visualization of concepts and insights derived through analytics to shape shared perceptions. As Hartmann et al. (2018) state, "The involvement of a broad range of systemic actors in institutional work raises the question of how individual selling actors participate in the shaping of institutional arrangements that enable and constrain value co-creation practices through service exchange" (Hartmann et al., 2018: 9). Visualization can be defined as the simplification in the communication of complex information through visual representations that efficiently and effectively convey the message to the service ecosystem and reduce the cognitive effort associated with the interpretation of complex insights to develop shared narratives.

"Storytelling is fundamental in our business because it builds a bond with the client from the beginning of the relationship. We always start with numbers, but we present them in a story and visual fashion to simplify the communication and convey our key message more effectively" (#23).

Companies are creating cross-functional teams involving computer scientists, marketing people, communication experts, and designers. These individuals specialize in information aesthetics to optimize and accelerate this process and identify new ways to provide broad and inclusive representations linking aspects and perspectives. The common goal is to develop visualizations that convey narratives and representations shared among multiple actors while maintaining the customer as a central part of the communication process by generating a one-to-one approach in which data is contextualized according to their environment.

Discussion

In this paper, we explore how value co-creation through selling is changing and how different organizations are managing this phenomenon in the wake of a relational perspective in service ecosystems. We capture and analyze the complexity of change in selling as a systemic, holistic, and multi-actor phenomenon, adopting a service ecosystem perspective as a theoretical foundation. We contribute to the recent debate on the changing role of selling by proposing a conceptual model of the transformative role of selling for value co-creation and explaining the dimensions shaping it (antecedents) and the boundary conditions enabling or preventing such processes. Our findings show how value co-creation through selling is a systematic, multi-actor, and holistic phenomenon that exceeds the interactions between buyers and sellers by combining human and technological dimensions whose transforming power is further activated by institutional arrangements that increase the alignment and coordination among different actors and the acceleration of processes and activities within the service ecosystem (boundary conditions). The transformation of selling for value co-creation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that comprises two antecedents: Hybridization of salespeople, Digital ecosystem empowerment, and two boundary conditions: Multi-actor integration and Acceleration, comprising a total of 23 sub-dimensions. Although the evolution of sales is not a new topic in sales research (Hartmann et al., 2018; Moncrief, 2017), past studies have mainly discussed it in reference to specific aspects, such as the evolution of selling orientations, technological applications to sales, the relationships between marketing and sales, and the emerging

new skills for increasing salespeople's performance (Lacoste, 2018; Plouffe, 2018). Similarly, companies often focus their investments and actions on one of these dimensions, missing the holistic nature of the transformative role of selling in value co-creation. This narrow focus results in many of the introduced changes not delivering a real and solid transformation, providing a limited impact on the effectiveness of selling activities overall.

We confirm that not only salespeople and customers are involved in value co-creation through selling, but that this phenomenon engages a broader set of actors operating in the service ecosystem (Hartmann et al., 2018; Markard, et al., 2016). We agree with Badrinarayanan et al. (2019) that "salespeople" is a classification for actors whose professional roles (i.e., job descriptions and titles) are sales-centric, but it is relevant to include a broader "selling actor" classification for all actors who perform selling regardless of their role.

The transformative role of selling in value co-creation implies not only a change in the role and skills of the sales function but also in the tension towards the search for an alignment across the increasing number of crossing points with the service ecosystem to change how narratives are formed and shared within markets (Hartmann et al., 2018). We thus confirm and enrich the contribution of Paesbrugghe et al. (2018) who state that understanding the purchasing function journey is regarded as important, but this should go beyond the customer to embrace an ecosystem perspective. These considerations lead us to define the transformative role of selling for value co-creation as a systemic phenomenon that is shaped by the hybridization of the sales function, empowered by digital technology advancements, and enabled by processes that promote the integration of multiple actors and accelerate value co-creation.

P1. *The transformation of selling for value co-creation is a holistic and systemic phenomenon that unfolds at the service ecosystem level. This change is shaped by a set of interrelated drivers that refer to human and technological elements and are enabled through processes integrating multiple actors and accelerating value co-creation processes (boundary conditions).*

We identify two key antecedents of the transformation of selling. First, the *hybridization of salespeople* which involves the ability of salespeople to enter and deeply understand customers by adopting the perspective of the actors operating in the service ecosystem when proposing solutions. Our study clearly illustrates that salespeople become trusted advisors (Cuevas, 2018; Delpechitre et al., 2019) but also act as boundary spanners (Edmondson and Boyer, 2013). Today, the demand for profiles that can leverage the new trend of "hybrid" value is growing. Salespeople of the future should develop a value-based selling process and be empathic with an entrepreneurial spirit, show adaptivity (Kienzler et al., 2019), while still able to measure value, make data-driven decisions, and deal with resource coordination at the service ecosystem level (Hartmann et al., 2018).

Our results also show that a sales approach that challenges the pre-defined ideas of empowered customers (Dixon and Adamson, 2011; Osmonbekov et al., 2019) should be considered with caution and possibly limited in modern contexts in favor of perspective selling. This new sales orientation we propose promotes the development of shared narratives that create common meaning and shared values around the institutions that enable or prevent value co-creation processes. It emphasizes the ability of salespeople to move beyond conveying value by bundling products and services towards solutions and actively contribute to the other party's success, which requires a change on multiple levels (Grove et al., 2018).

The central role of the human element in the transformation of selling is enriched by technology that acts to digitally empower the service ecosystem. The use of digital and social media technologies (Kuruzovich, 2013; Marshall et al., 2012), the emergence of big data (Erevelles et al., 2016), and the implementation of team-based structures and groupware technology (Janson et al.,

2014) generates strong expectations for the sales function of the future which will be smarter thanks to new forms of automation and human-machine interaction. Our results highlight how the sub-dimensions of *Salesforce Intelligence* and *Social Selling* represent the engines of this process. The implementation of artificial intelligence-driven solutions that harness data from multiple sources, including social media, has changed the logic of relationship development, new business identi-fication, and lead generation (Cuevas, 2018). It is interesting to note how sales automation is not only a way to improve relationships with customers, as traditionally discussed (see Baker and Delpechitre, 2013), but is also a way to reduce the time spent on collateral activities performed by salespeople (administrative duties, preparation of offerings, reporting, etc.). Digital technology in sales empowers salespeople when interacting with multiple actors and co-creates value through a service-for-service exchange (Hartmann et al., 2018), increasing the effectiveness of interactions, allowing for an adaptation of selling propositions and augmenting the customer experience (Guenzi and Habel, 2020).

Our findings highlight the importance of human and technological elements in shaping the transformation of selling for value co-creation (Cuevas, 2018; Hartmann et al., 2020b). We point out how companies approach the transformation of selling by combining and investing on human and digital dimensions. The combination of human and digital dimensions defines the configuration of the transformative power of selling and its implications for value co-creation processes. We observe that several companies tend to focus their transformation on either the human or the digital di-mension, leading to transformative processes that are either human-driven or technology-driven.

However, we point out how a balanced blend between these drivers is particularly beneficial in fostering change and enhancing value co-creation. Moreover, the combination of human and digital technology in selling requires a tailored approach to the specificities of the market and the ex-pectations of the multiple actors operating in the service ecosystem. It is, therefore, key to identifying transformative blends that combine human and technological elements to co-create value.

P2. *A focus on human or digital technology transformative elements is not sufficient to foster the transformation of selling for value co-creation. A balanced approach combining digital and human elements defines the transformative blends of selling for value co-creation.*

This study contributes to calls from recent literature for more research on the boundary con-ditions that may affect the transformation of selling for value co-creation based on the situation or timing, adding the temporal and contextual elements as constraints or promoters of the proposed model (Rapp et al., 2020a). It has been stated that as we move sales research towards a more holistic theoretical framework, boundary conditions can enrich the development of theory by explaining conflicting results and offering a greater understanding of when and how relationships emerge (Hartmann et al., 2020a). Thus, our model proposes two dimensions that act as boundary conditions of the transformation of selling for value co-creation, *Multi-actor integration*, and *Acceleration*. These dimensions enable the transformation of selling by making it more effective, efficient, and context-related to co-create value stemming from the exchanges in the ecosystem involving human and technology elements.

Multi-actor integration moves from a micro to a macro level providing a series of processes that regulate and promote the exchange between human and digital transformative components. We propose that multi-actor integration is developed across three levels: Cross-functional, internal-external, and physical-digital. As for the cross-functional, intra-organizational integration between marketing, sales, and customer service was confirmed to be pivotal (Bolander et al., 2015; Plouffe et al., 2016). We observed how the activities traditionally performed by salespeople are extended to

other departments within the organization. With regards to internal and external integration, joint platforms for data sharing at the ecosystem level are also needed (Brodie et al., 2019; Fehrer et al., 2018) to enable the boundary spanning role of salespeople connecting capabilities and resources of different actors in the service ecosystem (Blocker et al., 2012). For instance, by automatically integrating data to interactions occurring within the service ecosystem, mostly in conversations on social media or with the customer support service, CRM is playing a new role in facilitating coordination between more actors and resources in the ecosystem. This encourages and steers integration processes, increases the pace of transformation, and generates a virtuous circle, where service ecosystem data feeds into the CRM to provide actionable insights for decision-making across the customer journey touchpoints.

The second boundary condition that enables the transformation of selling for value co-creation refers to the *Acceleration of value co-creation processes*. Acceleration combines three sub-processes: the ability to lose fast, contextualization, and visualization. As for the first, the higher number of potential new leads reachable through technology, together with the consideration that many sales cycles have become longer than in the past due to more articulated buying processes, has boosted the development of new shared concepts; whereas the idea of losing fast, which somehow looks counterintuitive for selling theory, always focuses on the idea of "winning." Put differently, salespeople realize that to win somewhere in the ecosystem, it is necessary to lose somewhere else due to the scarce resources available, such as time (Corsaro, 2022).

In our study, we provide empirical support for the fact that the use of visual elements to support other forms of communication can facilitate the coordination between different ideas and therefore speed up the decision-making process. Akaka et al. (2013a) and Akaka et al. (2013b) already debated that shared or overlapping meanings/symbols are required for interaction or exchanges to occur within a system. As buyers are more selective and difficult to engage, due in part to in-formation overload, key messages need to be conveyed more concisely by leveraging visual insights to simplify communication with actors. The difficulty lies in the design of visualizations that are immediate, and above all, unequivocally intelligible by individuals in marketing, sales, and customer service.

Acceleration is also enabled through the contextualization of insights and data that is primarily fueled by access to information from mobile devices. This allows adherence to the context—here and now—and helps to make decisions where and when they are needed. This approach will feed the sales process with granular, highly specific, and contextualized data that will enable a better customer experience by offering answers when the problem or opportunity arises. We, therefore, provide practical evidence for the importance of generating value-in-use and in-context as a key part of selling at the ecosystem level (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006; Edvardsson et al., 2014; Vargo and Lusch, 2014).

Considered together, integration and acceleration are expressions of the importance of under-lying processes which, when coordinated, will have an impact on the performance of the sales organization. Their effect moves from a tactical sphere to a strategic one, defined by the literature as sales enablement which presents several opportunities to co-create value through selling and a systematic coordination among different initiatives and tools (Peterson and Dover, 2021). It is the coordination of disparate elements into an overarching business strategy for optimizing sales performance that makes sales enablement an emerging force in sales research (Rangarajan et al., 2020).

P3. *The transformation of selling for value co-creation is enabled by boundary conditions related to the integration of multiple actors operating in the service ecosystem and the acceleration of*

business markets. Such boundary conditions allow a contextual and integrated view of the transformative power of selling for value co-creation.

The proposed model contributes to a new theoretical foundation for selling, as suggested by Hartmann et al. (2018) and considers each dimension and sub-dimension simultaneously. It demonstrates that the transformative power of human and technological components can be leveraged only when interrelated with boundary conditions that reflect spatial and temporal dimensions, that is, multi-actor integration and acceleration of value co-creation. In this sense, the transformation of selling for value co-creation is a phenomenon that involves human and technological components in a specific context characterized by different degrees of acceleration of value co-creation and integration of sales-related activities.

Managerial implications

This study offers a roadmap for companies and managers to understand which areas should be further developed to better leverage the benefits of the transformative power of selling for value co-creation. For those organizations in the early stages of this transformation, our recommendation leans towards a balanced approach involving the four antecedents of the transformation of selling to support integration and acceleration processes and foster value co-creation. Our findings clearly illustrate that the fundamental actions required to increase the degree of collaboration and alignment starts within the organization and expands into the service ecosystem. Regarding salespeople, we highlight the relevance of perspective selling, which poses new challenges for the salesforce and requires new skills to be trained in the future. Among them is the ability to create new value narratives that spread at the ecosystem level.

The transformation of selling for value co-creation starts within the organization by enabling and supporting the integration of the marketing, sales, and customer service departments. This could be implemented through job rotation, joint KPIs, a social media marketing strategy aligned with a social selling strategy, and continuous communication between sales and customer service to manage the after-sale relationship. We foresee an opportunity to leverage the visualization process to create shared views and common narratives in the service ecosystem and promote the breakdown of a silo mentality. Salesforce intelligence and social selling have then been identified as key enablers of digital service ecosystems. An advanced implementation of CRM is also critical in facilitating the multi-actor integration at different levels and the co-creation of value with different actors in the ecosystem. CRM systems should be able to manage the growing complexity of companies' business networks and consider the strong interconnectedness of different actors operating in the ecosystem.

In the future, we expect sales to be based on data-driven insights and on artificial intelligence support to optimize the sales funnel. This will make it possible to reach customers at the right time and with the preferred channel, offering a specific solution to a problem. The role of training and professional development of salespeople is then critical to successfully tackling the challenges posed by the transformation of selling. Customized training based on individual needs and personality traits, combined with a dynamic coaching process at individual and team levels, can contribute to strengthening the sales function and its members' skills and capabilities.

In conclusion, it is critical for organizations to closely monitor the transformation of selling for value co-creation and identify potential weak points and areas of risk across the different antecedents. According to these insights, organizations could proceed with a rebalancing of the transformative mix and leverage the positive effects on value co-creation within the service ecosystem.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the antecedents of transformation in selling for value co-creation and it thus comes with limitations. Qualitative research provides rich and detailed information about the views of respondents and is uniquely suited to unraveling complex phenomena. Although the semi-structured interview protocol was carefully designed and the reported data and sample were reasonably representative of sales professionals, we cannot be completely certain that the interview protocol questions, wording, and sequencing did not unduly influence respondents (Arsel, 2017). Caution should be also used in applying these results across sales situations and service ecosystems. Future research should involve multiple companies and a larger sample before drawing final conclusions on the proposed model. The sales professionals in our sample came from companies with different backgrounds and experiencing different stages of the transformation of selling. However, we did not measure the actual perception of the degree of change in selling practices perceived by key informants but rather gained insight into their experiences and instances of transformative activities that were implemented. Moreover, future studies should involve multiple actors operating in the service ecosystem other than sales professionals to validate and confirm the generalizability of our results.

This research opens interesting avenues for future research. First, future studies could explore how different transformative blends that combine human and technological elements influence value co-creation. Second, research should analyze the effect of different combinations of the antecedents and boundary conditions of the transformation of selling for value co-creation on relevant outcomes, such as revenue generation, salespeople performance, and salespeople retention. Third, the proposed framework could also be investigated across different types of companies and industries to generate more actionable insights tailored to the needs of specific organizations.

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Appendix A

Interview and focus group themes

1. Please introduce yourself and your company
2. Have you observed any changes in selling and sales management in your company over the past 5 years? Could you share some practical examples?
3. What do you think are the most relevant changes that affect value co-creation in your organization and network?
4. What changes have you observed with reference to salespeople?

5. What changes have you observed with reference to technological support and implementation?
6. What were the key challenges that your organization faced or is facing with reference to the transformation of selling? How is your organization overcoming them?
7. Is your company investing and/or developing new policies in selling to support change in this function? How?

Appendix B

Selected evidence

First-order themes	Second-order themes	Selected evidence on first-order codes
Hybridization of salespeople	Perspective selling	**Salespeople as advisors** Customers are looking for a salesperson who provides them with a solution with benefits that will last over time. They do not want solutions that worked for other customers, they want to be treated as a specific, if not a unique case. (#8) The distinction between selling and consultancy will become less and less evident, as transactional selling will be substituted by technology, and selling per se will be only about building relationships. (#44) We promote a selling approach strongly oriented towards the identification of problems and proposal of solutions. When I meet my client, my goal is not merely selling my new product, but understanding and showing how this new product can bring value to my clients' business. (#42) One of our salesmen achieved excellent results by selling equipment for body treatments during off-season. His colleagues asked him how he managed to sell the body equipment during the facial treatment season. He replied "Sorry, what is the facial treatment season?"—He did not have the preconceived ideas his colleagues had. (#17) **Balancing knowledge and salesmanship skills** Selling requires a more structured approach and managerial capabilities that are stronger than in the past. Today's salespeople face buyers who are more focused on margin optimization and negotiations benefit from having a clear vision of the entire service ecosystem to understand how far it is possible to go. (#22) The education of a modern salesperson is holistic. It starts with salesmanship and negotiation skills and is enriched by marketing capabilities and deepened through financial knowledge. (#18) Buyers are so empowered that they think they are more prepared than you are. They tend to be skeptical, and it is not easy to change their mindset when they are so confident and already think they know the solution to their problem. In that case, I try to make very concrete and tangible the consequences of not acting to change the status quo. It is not just about selling and negotiating, a clear vision and strategic management of the relationship is key. (#24) Empathy is crucial and without it, gaining a client's trust is impossible, even with a solid and extensive technical knowledge. (#8)

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First-order themes	Second-order themes	Selected evidence on first-order codes
	Salesforce upskilling	*Tailored training and mentoring*
		Salespeople should be allowed to identify their training needs. This is done through constant coaching that is then complemented with dedicated training to understand customers' emotional engagement and learn how to develop relationships. (#40)
		We do not recruit our salespeople based on their experience only. We try to understand them better from an emotional point of view and assign customers based on their decision-making style. If you assign charismatic salespeople to a thinker buyer, it will be quite difficult to establish a good relationship. (#28)
		Strategic approach to training and talent development
		Training and coaching are conducted on a continuous basis in many organizations. Salespeople are offered many opportunities to enhance their skills and we coach them to decide which activity is best suited to them. (#37)
		We offer customized training programs that are developed with our company values and principles at the core. It is important to differentiate ourselves from competitors, also when offering training to our salesforce. Our training program leverages our peculiarities to bring up relevant elements that should be presented to our customers. (#5)
		We support salespeople when choosing their training, but the final decision is their own. Our coaching program is an investment in our salespeople aimed at helping them to understand and manage their autonomy and leverage it. (#34)
Digital ecosystem empowerment	Systematic and real-time salesforce management	*Real-time institutional arrangements to support the salesforce*
		I am the leader of a sales team and we use the CRM app through our smartphones. In this way I can geo-localize where salespeople are and better organize their activity. (#44)
		It is important to interact in real-time to obtain relevant and up-to-date information about customers and other actors. (#45)
		Without technology it would be quite complex to coordinate all my salespeople in real-time. It helps us to work together towards a common goal and systematically stay up to date. (#12)
	Social selling	*Social media as a relationship booster*
		LinkedIn is an evolution of the approach to people. We increasingly use that tool as a way to reach out to the market and to potential clients. It makes it simpler to retrieve past contacts or approach new clients avoiding call calls. (#5)
		Through social media you can reach sharing levels that were impossible some years ago through traditional tools and this gives you visibility and popularity. (#27)

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First-order themes	Second-order themes	Selected evidence on first-order codes
		We study their behavior over time, and we qualify the leads, in fact in the field we call it Digital lead generation. It is a tool through which we try to qualify interests from parts of existing customers or potential customers. (#19)
		With social media we can convey information and promotional messages in a simpler and more direct way when customers become more receptive. We believe that there is a broad margin of development for these applications in the future. (#32)
		Our company uses Facebook and Instagram and our sales policy requires salespeople to communicate with our customers through these platforms using mainly videos and tutorials. (#17)
	Salesforce intelligence	Automation and artificial intelligence
		Every time I have to prepare a sales proposal, I take an old one, and I change some parts. I would like this to happen at least partially in an automated way. We spend too much time on things that are very marginal to sales. We have to improve our ability to focus on what really matters, in my case that is selling. (#46)
		We obtained some results through the application of artificial intelligence systems to our client database and identified up-selling and cross-selling opportunities. We have a dedicated department to business intelligence that works with big data. (#29)
		It is essential to devote as much time as possible to negotiation, the relationship with the client and less to that which is the management of the external customer, to the part of sending the order, formation of the order and all the internal procedures. So, automated systems that provide a fast and suitable service to humans is fundamental. (#10)
		Wasting time in entering orders, checking discounts, etc. means arriving later at the sale closing and therefore reducing the level of service provided to our customers. (#6)
		Big data and analytics
		The problem is not gaining the data; the issue is not to end up drowning in data. Big data is great, but if salespeople do not know how to translate it into insights, what's the point? (#36)
		Information is so vast that it is not possible for humans to cognitively process everything. What we need is to simplify such complexity and machines can play a key role, suggesting to both sales and customer services people what are the best actions to be pursued with a customer or potential lead. (#16)
		Big data applications and analytics require an investment in technology and methodologies to retrieve, analyze and discover unknown connections among data. The end goal is improving targeting, discovering opportunities and improving the efficiency of operations. (#31)
		Synchronized strategies and operations

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First-order themes	Second-order themes	Selected evidence on first-order codes
Multi-actor integration	Sales–marketing–customer service integration	I have always argued that we should have a global sales-marketing director who integrates these two functions, and this is not the case. I don't think our CEO gives great importance to marketing. (#1) The crucial element for me is the trade marketing, in the sense that it is the trade union between the pure marketing vision (which often remains outside the commercial logic) and the pure sales vision (which just as often remains outside what is internal company vision). A strong trade marketing allows a constructive and profitable relationship between these two functions. (#15) Behind the scenes, there are a series of internal processes that are conducted with a team-based perspective. One person coordinates them, another gives indications about the best products to propose, and another presents them to customers. (#31) *Institutionalized and systematic exchange* The customer service passes me all complaints or requests from customers because my job as a salesperson does not stop when the contract is signed but keeps going in the after-sale relationship. And this is key also because I draw a commission from renewals. (#47) Marketing is very supportive in preparing our sales presentations and gives us insights on current trends, so I only need to adapt them to a specific situation. (#48) Anything that is not passed on to sales stays in the marketing funnel. Before heading to sales, leads are preliminary managed by marketing through digital tools. (#14) *Team-driven and multi-actor perspective* We are trying to organize ourselves in sort of tribes and apply customer journey concepts. We have moved to a non-hierarchical structure that supports the autonomy of each salesperson within the team. (#33) Behind the scenes, there are a series of internal processes that are conducted with a team-based perspective. One person coordinates them, another gives indications about the best products to propose, and another presents them to customers. (#31) It is important to identify the inner motivation driving different subjects and provide tools and a team that support the work of a salesperson. (#5) *Shared performance metrics* Marketing and sales are converging; it is then in the organizational ability to make them work together. In our company, they have common KPIs on the digital transformation part, on the one that generates the digital channel. (#33) It is important for these departments to be aware that they are not in competition, but they are working towards a common goal. (#7)

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First-order themes	Second-order themes	Selected evidence on first-order codes
		Joint KPIs are for example, the number of leads, and redemption rates. On these indicators we evaluate the joint action of these departments. (#29)
	Internal and external network integration	Sharing information with multiple actors
		Welcome to the internet of customers, where every company can connect every app, employee, partner, product, and device with its customers using the power of social, mobile, and cloud. (#23)
		Industrial distributors are not used to collecting information, and even less accustomed to pass it onto producers. (#1)
		Multi-actor institutional arrangements
		Our CRM is the starting point of everything we do: anyone can look at a customer from different angles, including marketing. With this new system we will have a single tool that goes from the lead to the sales part, including numbers and estimates. (#29)
		Social CRM is now able to integrate data from inside and outside the organization, in order to propose (few) relevant insights, in real-time, easy to understand, also thanks to the support of dashboards. (#9)
		CRM 2.0 should also enable new forms of interaction between sales force, channel partners, and other actors in the inter-organizational network and provide both predictive (what will happen) and prescriptive (what to do) indications. (#28)
	Physical and integration	Sales policies integrated across channels
		It is important to have a holistic view of the different channels. We complement our interactions with online support and keep track of both channels when defining our goals. (#33)
		Our salespeople operate considering the different channels as one. We develop sales policies that consider the online and offline. (#42)
		Leveraging omnichannel tools
		Many companies declare to have an omnichannel strategy but having different touchpoints does not mean anything if they are not integrated. (#9)
		We have a tool that acts as a customer portal and looks like a complete e-commerce dedicated to our customers: they find prices and can configure the product and then lodge the order. We try to take advantage of digitalization, but at the same time we prioritize a mix between traditional sales and digital sales. (#1)
Acceleration	Lose fast	Selective focus on opportunities
		Since we know that 70% of deals will be lost, what is really important is to lose fast, in order to free energies to invest in other opportunities. (#37)

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First-order themes	Second-order themes	Selected evidence on first-order codes
		Data assists us with evaluating the potential of different opportunities and leads. This is critical to identify the most promising ones. You have to be more selective and focus your resources. It is ok to dismiss the not so appealable or less likely opportunities, but that needs to happen fast to not waste time. (#19)
		Speeding up the sales funnel
		A top performer in sales is good at transmitting to the customer a sense of urgency. (#47)
		New generations will be more used to such velocity of change, but for us it is very tough to keep up with it, especially when it comes to new communication modes. (#6)
	Contextualization	Actionable information
		There is plenty of data and information available out there. However, it is of no use unless it is put into context, elaborated, and made it actionable. (#6)
		Leads are attracted by digital tools. We see them are already widespread in the B2C world; while we are strongly pushing them this year with a system that gives us the possibility to trace everything that happens in the digital world. In this way we isolate the event we should act on. (#22)
		Today with a simple smartphone I can see who my customers are, where they are and their entire relationship history with the company or with a specific salesperson. All interactions are mapped to then cluster our customers and develop tailored selling propositions and offers. (#48)
		Real-time response to market
		It is essential to create channels that allow you to respond quickly and be decisive and efficient on the market. Anticipating competitors on certain topics is the winning key and we are living proof of this. (#35)
		We have recently introduced a new platform that provides daily data and figures to our salesforce. Based on their daily activities, the software provides recommendation and relevant information to address the market and develop their sales activity. (#47)
		Our CRM allows us to optimize the time to market and so to be more effective without wasting time in routine activities. In this way we offer a higher service to our customers. (#31)
		The fact of being able to think that if something works today, it must also work in a year and instead it is absolutely not true. Among other things we have created an internal motto: 'if it works it is already obsolete', it begins to think about how to do things differently. (#4)
	Visualization	Visual storytelling

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First-order themes	Second-order themes	Selected evidence on first-order codes
		When you are in front of customers, if you do not get their attention in the first 30 seconds, they will start to reply to their emails through their smartphone. It is better to be concise using the support of visualizations. (#38)
		I try to associate concepts to images because they stay much more impressed in people's mind. (#45)
	Shared representations	
		In this process the customer is an integral part of the context and is put in a position to concentrate on what he sees, finding an impact visualization and thus generating a one-to-one approach; it is not just a receiver, but the data is contextualized according to your environment. (#16)

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