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From personal to online selling: How relational selling shapes salespeople's promotion of e-commerce channels

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ABSTRACT

In the digital economy, many business-to-business companies expect their salespeople to promote e-commerce channels to customers as alternative ways to purchase. However, salespeople are often hesitant to comply with this approach, which despite its high practical relevance, has been rarely examined by academic research. Therefore, the authors develop a theoretical framework outlining key determinants of salespeople's promotion of e-commerce channels. To this end, the authors integrate relational-selling theory with goal-setting theory and test their conceptualization using a multilevel data set comprising surveys of 68 salespeople, 220 customers, and objective company data. The results show that salespeople who are more relational-selling oriented are less likely to promote the use of e-commerce channels—especially if a customer has a negative attitude toward e-commerce or if competitors are focused on personal selling. With these findings, our study helps managers improve their salespeople's essential role as promoters of e-commerce channels.

1. Introduction

E-commerce in business-to-business (B2B) markets will continue to become more and more important in the future (Singh et al., 2019). In fact, Wu and Kumar (2018) forecasted that sales generated through e-commerce channels will double between 2018 and 2023 and will then account for 17% of all B2B transactions in the United States. For companies, the increasing shift toward e-commerce may produce significant efficiency gains, because e-commerce channels will relieve sales staff of low-value tasks such as order management and delivery tracking (Guenzi & Habel, 2020; Lapoule & Colla, 2016; Singh et al., 2019; Thaichon et al., 2018).

To exploit the potential of e-commerce, B2B companies often expect their sales staff to serve as promoters who nudge customers to shift purchases to the e-commerce channels. However, these expectations often are not realized. To confirm this anecdotal evidence from our work with B2B companies, we conducted a preliminary survey of 77 senior sales managers. As predicted, they strongly expect their sales staff to promote their company's e-commerce channels to customers ($M = 5.9$ on a 7-point scale) but indicated that salespeople do not comply with this expectation frequently enough ($M = 5.0$). Earlier research had already recognized this danger: "The direct firm-customer interaction of a Web-based channel potentially undermines the salesperson's symbolic role as the vanguard of the firm-customer relationship. In this sense, it is unsurprising, therefore, that salespeople within large network marketing firms such as Avon, Mary Kay, and Tupperware have demonstrated considerable resistance to the implementation of independent Web-based channels." (Johnson & Bharadwaj, 2005, p. 4).

Interestingly, academic research has rarely examined salespeople's resistance to promoting a firm's e-commerce channel (Sarin et al., 2012). As Ahearne and Rapp (2010, p. 110) asked over 10 years ago: "Does the salesperson influence the consumer in some way to adopt the technology?" Even a decade later, this question had not been resolved. As Singh et al. (2019) reiterated: "an intriguing research void in this respect refers to the question of how salespeople do and should integrate digital sales channels in their selling efforts […] When and with what success do salespeople promote digital channels to customers (e.g., Ahearne and Rapp, 2010)? How can companies foster salespeople's acceptance of digital sales channels as an opportunity for value creation?"

Our study will take a first step in answering these questions. To this end, we integrate relational-selling theory (e.g., Arli et al., 2018; Weitz & Bradford, 1999) with goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2019).

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Building on this integration, we examine the effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation (i.e., a salesperson's interest in a long-term relationship with the customer; Ganesan, 1994) on the salesperson's promotion of e-commerce to customers. We propose that increases in a salesperson's relational-selling orientation lead to decreases in their promotion of e-commerce channels to customers, because customers purchasing online would undermine the salesperson's goal of building personal relationships with these customers. In addition, we suggest that the effects of relational-selling orientation on the promotion of e-commerce channels are moderated by two contingency factors. First, we propose that the negative effect of relational-selling orientation on e-commerce promotion is less pronounced if a customer has a positive attitude toward e-commerce. In this case, a salesperson may perceive e-commerce promotion as a means to strengthen the relationship. Second, we assume that the negative effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on the promotion of e-commerce channels will be intensified if competitors place a high focus on personal selling. In this case, relationship-oriented salespeople may see their customer relationships as even more at risk. Finally, we hypothesize that an increase in e-commerce promotion will result in an increase of customer revenue generated through the e-commerce channel.

To empirically test our hypotheses, we cooperated with a B2B direct sales company focusing on consumables and tools for professional users of fastening technology. We use a multilevel data set consisting of survey data of salespeople (level 2, N = 68), customers (level 1, N = 220) and objective company data per customer (level 1). We analyze this data using a multilevel path model and find support for our hypotheses. Our results are robust against inclusion of control variables (such as a salesperson's role focus of hunting versus farming), endogeneity checks, and the use of different estimators (maximum likelihood versus Bayesian).

Our results are relevant to both research and practice. We make at least three important contributions to research. First, we close the research gap raised by Ahearne and Rapp (2010) and reiterated by Singh et al. (2019) as we demonstrate that salespeople's recommendations lead customers to use e-commerce channels. Second, our study is the first to integrate relational-selling theory with goal-setting theory. This integration should prove useful to future sales research, as it depicts how salespeople's personal needs and motives can translate to specific selling behaviors such as promotion or avoidance of e-commerce channels. Third, our study contributes to adaptive-selling theory (Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Weitz et al., 1986). Specifically, we show that salespeople not only adapt their behaviors to customers' needs (Alavi et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2006), but also to their own needs—a perspective that provides a plethora of avenues for future research.

For practice, our study has three key implications. First, we show that salespeople can support customers' adoption of e-commerce channels by intensively promoting these channels. Companies can therefore use sales staff as multipliers when aiming to strengthen their e-commerce revenue. Second, our results point to possible dangers if salespeople promote e-commerce channels too strongly. Relationally oriented salespeople perceive e-commerce as a danger to their customer relationships, especially if a customer is not positive about e-commerce or if competitors are strongly focused on personal selling. Companies should take these potential dangers seriously and systematically manage them. Third, if these dangers are unfounded, managers should set e-commerce-related goals for their relationally oriented salespeople and sensitize them to the fact that successfully promoting e-commerce can strengthen rather than threaten customer relationships.

2. Hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical background

To build our conceptual model, we integrate relational-selling theory (e.g., Arli et al., 2018; Weitz & Bradford, 1999) with goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2019).[1] In the following paragraphs, we first describe the basic tenets of the two theories and subsequently provide an integrated view as the basis for our hypotheses.

Relational-selling theory states that a salesperson's fundamental role is that of a "partner" to customers, aiming to build and maintain long-term relationships (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). To build and maintain long-term relationships, salespeople use a variety of strategies (Palmatier et al., 2007), such as customer orientation, adaptive selling, and relational investments (Arli et al., 2018; Guenzi et al., 2007). At the same time, salespeople avoid activities that threaten customer relationships, such as manipulative tactics (e.g., Alavi et al., 2018), selling orientation (e.g., Saxe & Weitz, 1982), or confrontational conflicts with customers (e.g., Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Relational-selling theory emerged in the 1970s due to rising global competition. Today, it constitutes the dominant view in both managerial practice (e.g., Rausch, 2019) and academia (Arli et al., 2018). In fact, many recent academic studies on personal selling examined relational phenomena between salespeople and customers, such as the impact of relationship disruptions on sales performance (Schmitz et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2017) and the impact of relational orientations on salespeople's behavior in price negotiations (Lawrence et al., 2021; Wieseke et al., 2014). In addition, prior studies have established that salespeople differ in the extent of their relational-selling orientation (Ganesan, 1994; Guenzi et al., 2007; Guo & Ng, 2012; Keillor et al., 2000).

The second theoretical basis for our conceptualizations is goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2019). Goal-setting theory examines how goals shape individuals' behaviors and resulting performance. One of the theory's basic tenets is that personal goals can derive from an individual's role in the company and have a motivating effect on individuals as they "direct people's attention to relevant behaviors or outcomes and away from nongoal-relevant activities these individuals strive to accomplish" (Miner, 2005, p. 164, 170). Importantly, how goals translate to behaviors and performance hinges on moderators: "Goal-directed action may be facilitated or hindered by environmental factors and the degree of support an individual receives (e.g., people, money, facilities)" (Locke & Latham, 2019, p. 98).

Prior research has frequently tested goal-setting theory in the sales context and has shown that the theory accurately predicts salesperson behavior. For example, Brown et al. (1997) showed that during product promotions, salespeople choose goal-directed behavior, which affects their goal attainment in terms of number of units sold. Similarly, Fu et al. (2009) showed that goals motivate salespeople to effectively sell new products.

We argue that goal-setting theory and relational-selling theory can effectively be combined to conceptualize contingent effects of salespeople's relational-selling orientation on promotion of e-commerce channels. Specifically, both theories converge on the prediction that relationally oriented salespeople choose behaviors conducive to—and avoid behaviors countering—the building and maintaining of relationships with customers (Harris et al., 2005). Interestingly, while works on

[1] Importantly, e-commerce promotion is likely to be driven by further variables, such as compensation and reward systems (Sarin et al., 2012). For example, if sales generated in the e-commerce channel do not count toward salespeople's quota, salespeople might be less likely to promote e-commerce to customers. In our study, we empirically control for this and other factors through our choice of a single company and the inclusion of a broad set of covariates. This allows us to parcel out the effect of relational selling and goal-setting in our conceptualization and empirical work.

relational selling often define which behaviors are "relational" wholesale (e.g., Arli et al., 2018; Guenzi et al., 2007; Habel et al., 2020), goal-setting theory adds the importance of situational contingencies that may increase or decrease a behavior's property as "relational." These notions build the foundation for our hypotheses, which we derive in the following (see Fig. 1).

2.2. The effect of relational selling on e-commerce promotion

E-commerce promotion refers to the degree to which a salesperson recommends purchasing through the e-commerce channel to a customer. Prior literature has not yet linked e-commerce promotion to relational-selling theory (Arli et al., 2018), which raises the question of whether relationally oriented salespeople will choose or avoid this behavior. In this hypothesis, we propose a testable answer to this question.

We expect that on average, relationally oriented salespeople will be more likely to *refrain* from recommending their company's e-commerce channel to customers, suggesting a negative effect between a salesperson's relational-selling orientation and e-commerce promotion. This is because relationally oriented salespeople have a goal to build and maintain relationships with customers, which requires personal contact (Schmitz et al., 2020). However, when customers become accustomed to purchasing online, a salesperson's opportunity for cultivating the customer relationship through personal contact might become limited (Lawrence et al., 2019). As a result, both relational-selling theory and goal-setting theory suggests that relationally oriented salespeople disengage from behaviors which may result in customers' increased frequentation of the e-commerce channel (see also Johnson & Bharadwaj, 2005). Importantly, as we argue in the subsequent hypotheses, we expect this effect to be contingent on situational factors that determine to what extent e-commerce threatens salesperson–customer relationships. We hypothesize:

H_1: An increase in a salesperson's relational-selling orientation leads to a decrease in the salesperson's e-commerce promotion.

2.3. Moderating effects on a salesperson's e-commerce promotion

As outlined previously, goal-setting theory suggests that situational factors determine the extent to which goals manifest in factual behavior (Locke & Latham, 2019). Transferred to our study, whether e-commerce promotion conflicts with a salesperson's goals to build and maintain relationships should depend on two key factors that we deduce from the framework of relational selling. Specifically, as Fig. 2 illustrates, a focal salesperson does not build and maintain relationships with a customer in isolation but faces competitors who likewise aim for such relationships (Ahearne et al., 2007; Dax et al., 2019). Thus, relationally oriented salespeople should be particularly motivated to (1) avoid behaviors that weaken their own personal relationship with a customer, (2) adopt behaviors that strengthen their personal relationship with a customer, and (3) avoid behaviors that help their competitors strengthen their relationships with customers. While we addressed (1) in the previous discussion of the main effect of salespeople's relational-selling orientation, from this notion, we deduce two moderating factors for our conceptualization: (2) a customer's attitude toward e-commerce and (3) competitors' personal selling focus. In the following, we elaborate on the arguments for these moderators.

First, we argue that a customer's attitude toward e-commerce weakens (i.e., positively moderates) the negative effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on e-commerce promotion. Specifically, if a customer has a positive attitude toward e-commerce, a salesperson should be more likely to see the promotion of e-commerce channels as an opportunity to create value for the customer and thus strengthen the customer relationship (Arli et al., 2018; Guenzi & Habel, 2020; Lapoule & Colla, 2016; Montaguti et al., 2016; Schmitz et al., 2020). In terms of goal-setting theory, e-commerce promotion would become a goal-congruent behavior and thus more likely chosen by a relationally oriented salesperson (Locke & Latham, 2019).

Conversely, if a customer has a negative attitude toward e-commerce, a relationally oriented salesperson may be more likely to evaluate the promotion of these channels as potentially damaging for the customer's trust and thus for the customer relationship (Arli et al., 2018; Schmitz et al., 2020). Therefore, e-commerce promotion would be less likely to be a goal-congruent behavior and thus less likely chosen by a relationally oriented salesperson. We hypothesize:

H_2: The negative effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on e-commerce promotion is less pronounced if customers' attitude toward e-commerce is positive.

Second, *competitors' personal selling focus* refers to the extent to which competitors sell through personal interactions with customers. We expect that if competitors' personal selling focus is high, a relationally oriented salesperson will be less likely to promote e-commerce to customers. Again, this reasoning rests on our previous notion that relationally oriented salespeople might perceive a customer's increasing online purchases as a danger to their customer relationships. This perceived danger should be reinforced by a high competitors' personal selling focus, because a salesperson's decreasing frequency of personal interaction with the customer would give competitors an advantage with customers. Specifically, competitors who continue to sell

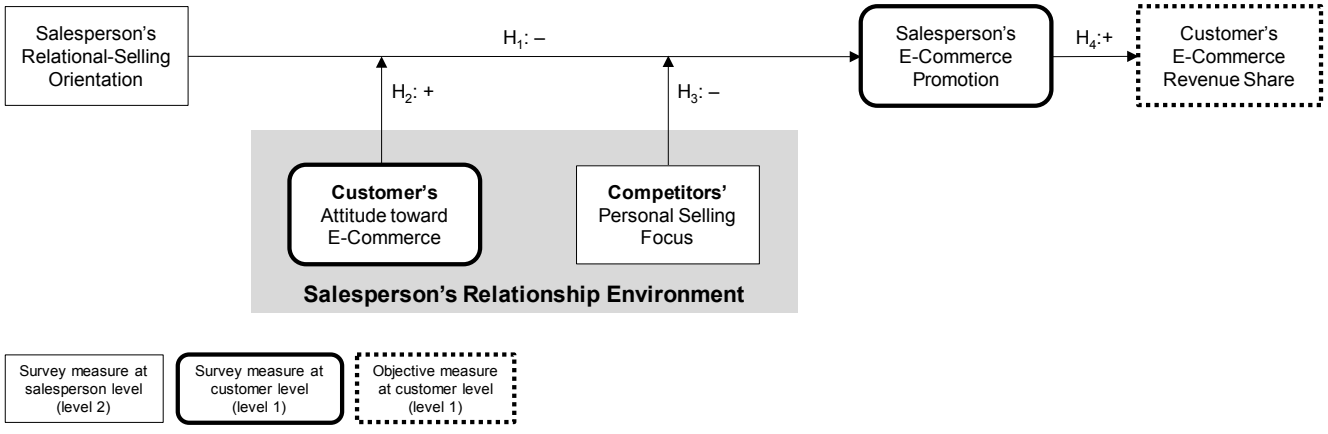

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework.

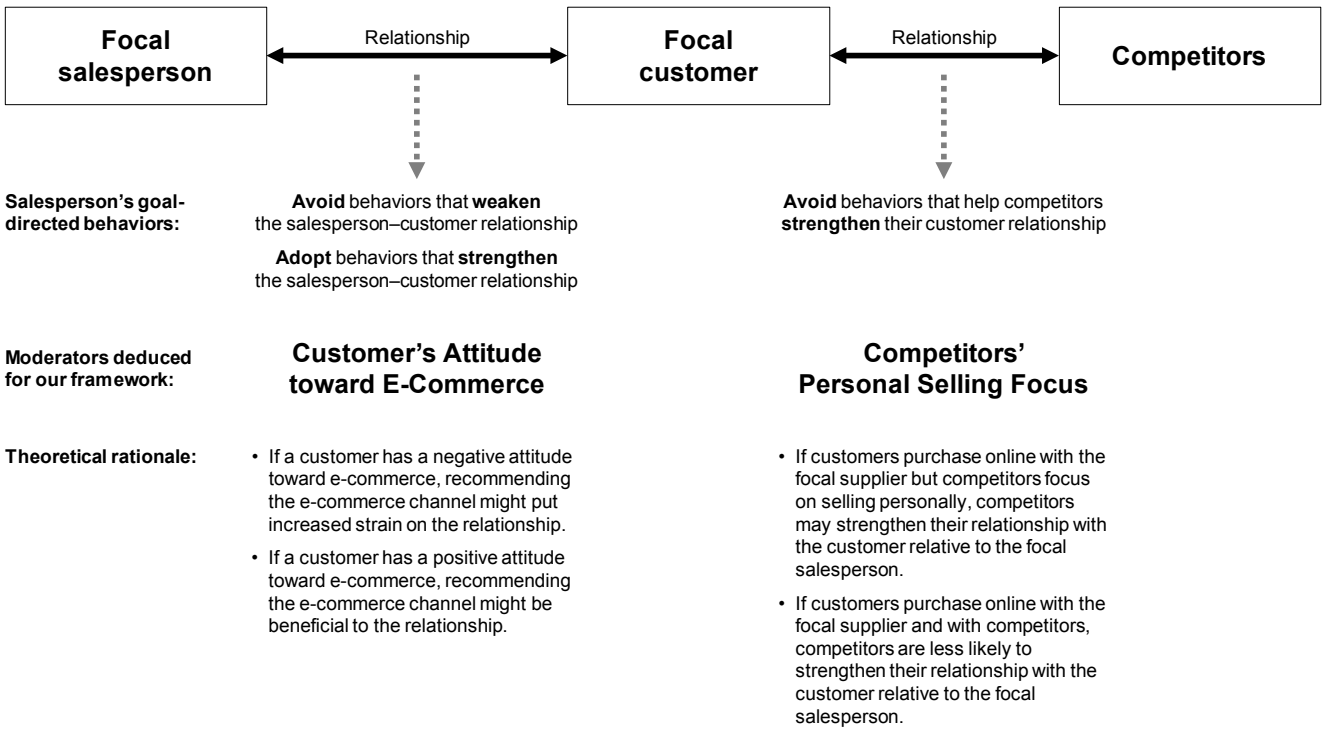

Fig. 2. Motivation of Moderators.

personally may strengthen their relationships with customers relative to the focal salesperson, which may allow them to ultimately poach the customer.

In summary, if competitors' personal selling focus is high, goal-setting theory predicts that a relationally oriented salesperson may be particularly motivated to continue selling personally to customers rather than fostering e-commerce sales. Conversely, if competitors' personal selling focus is low, a relationally oriented salesperson should be less anxious that online purchases and thus a decrease of customer contact will give competitors an advantage in the customer relationship. Accordingly, the salesperson should be less hesitant to promote e-commerce channels to customers. We hypothesize:

H_3: The negative effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on e-commerce promotion is more pronounced if competitors' personal selling focus is high.

2.4. The effect of e-commerce promotion on e-commerce revenue share

In the final step, we propose that a salesperson's e-commerce promotion increases a customer's share of e-commerce revenue for two reasons. First, a salesperson's e-commerce promotion may increase the customer's awareness of an e-commerce channel, which renders it more likely that the customer purchases online (Verbeke et al., 2011). Second, previous research shows that customers value and often follow recommendations from salespeople (Agnihotri et al., 2009; McFarland et al., 2006). Thus:

H_4: An increase in the salesperson's e-commerce promotion leads to an increase in the customer's e-commerce revenue share.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

Closely aligned with our hypotheses, the goal of our study is first to analyze the effect of the salesperson's relational-selling orientation (H_1) on e-commerce promotion. Second, we examine the moderating effects of a customer's attitude toward e-commerce (H_2) and competitors' personal selling focus (H_3). Finally, we inspect the effect of e-commerce promotion on a customer's e-commerce revenue share (H_4).

For this study, we cooperated with a company that markets consumables and tools for professional users of fastening technology, such as companies working on construction sites or workshops. Initially, the company's sales focus was exclusively on direct sales: sales staff drove to the respective customers and accepted orders or returns on site. In the past years, the company increasingly digitized sales and introduced an online shop in 2013. Customers can use the online shop to collect information, place orders, and return orders. Regardless of their channel preference, however, each customer is assigned to a specific field salesperson, and any sales with this customer contribute to the achievement of that salesperson's quota. Thus, the compensation plan does not counteract salespeople's adoption of e-commerce, which is an important feature of our study and allows us to parcel out the effect of salespeople's relational-selling orientation.

To collect data, we started by extracting a list from company records that comprised the contact details of customers for whom two pieces of information were available: (a) objective data on the share of revenue generated with this customer via e-commerce (our ultimate outcome variable), and (b) an identifier of the field salesperson responsible for serving this customer (to collect survey data from the corresponding salespeople). The list comprised 35,631 customers matched to 278 salespeople. We then proceeded to collect data in three steps.

First, we collected an online survey among the 278 salespeople. We obtained 68 complete responses for a response rate of 24.5%, which is comparable with other studies (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2007). To rule out a non-response bias, we compared early and late respondents (Armstrong & Overton, 1977) and found that they did not differ on our survey variables. Thus, a non-response bias is unlikely to unduly influence our results.

Second, we surveyed the customers of salespeople in our sample. Specifically, we were able to match 9,929 customers to completed

salesperson surveys; we then approached these customers with the help of an online survey. We obtained 220 completed customer surveys for a response rate of 2.2%. Given that this response rate is low, we took three precautions against a potential non-response bias: (a) We again compared the mean values of our survey variables for early and late respondents (Armstrong & Overton, 1977), which revealed no significant differences. (b) We compared our ultimate dependent variable, share of e-ecommerce revenue, for respondents (M = 5.8%) and non-respondents (M = 4.6%). The mean difference is not significant (t = −1.05, $p > .10$). Taken together, both steps provide evidence that a non-response bias is unlikely. (c) We verified the robustness of our model using the correction procedure proposed by Heckman (1976). We outline this procedure in our supplemental analyses.

Third, we extracted from company records each customer's revenue and their share of e-commerce revenue. We then matched salesperson surveys, customer surveys, and objective data to a multi-source, multilevel data set comprising 68 salespeople (69.5% male, mean age of 43 years) matched to 220 customers (91.8% male, mean age of 47 years).

3.2. Measures

We measured salesperson's relational-selling orientation and competitors' personal selling focus in the salesperson survey (i.e., on level 2). Salesperson's e-commerce promotion and customer's attitude toward e-commerce were measured in the customer survey (i.e., on level 1). As outlined previously, customer's e-commerce revenue share was collected objectively from company records (level 1). We log-transformed the variable to mitigate skewness. Importantly, the fact that we collected the independent and dependent variables from different sources alleviates concerns of a potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

We controlled for several variables to reduce omitted variable bias. First, seeing that the promotion and adoption of e-commerce may depend on customers' size, we controlled for each customer's revenue (log-transformed to mitigate skewness). Second, we controlled for a salesperson's age to take into account that young salespeople may be more digitally savvy and thus more likely to promote e-commerce channels (Speier & Ventakesh, 2002). Third, we controlled for a salesperson's tenure to consider that with increasing tenure, salespeople's willingness to change learned routines may decrease (Jaramillo et al., 2012). Fourth, we controlled for a salesperson's degree of adaptive selling, which has shown to affect a salesperson's behavior in customer interactions (Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Alavi et al., 2019). Fifth, we controlled for a salesperson's task orientation, that is, the degree to which salespeople aim for efficiency in their selling process (e.g., Homburg et al., 2011; Barrick et al., 2002; Williams & Spiro, 1985). This is because e-commerce channels offer efficiency gains (Guenzi & Habel, 2020; Singh et al., 2019) and might thus be particularly promoted by salespeople with a high task orientation.

All measurements are listed in the Appendix A. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, correlations, and psychometric properties of the variables. To evaluate the reliability and convergent validity of our measurements, we assessed Cronbach's alpha and conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (see Table 1). All Cronbach's alpha values of the scales exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). Furthermore, all scales fulfill the recommended values for the composite reliability and average variance extracted (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Lastly, the squared correlations between the latent constructs are smaller than the average variance extracted from each construct, which implies discriminant validity of the scales (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

3.3. Model specifications and results

As explained previously, the data used for our model conforms to a multilevel structure. To evaluate the necessity of using a multilevel estimation approach, we inspected the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs), which indicate the proportion of variance in a dependent variable. If ICCs exceed a value of 0.05, a multilevel approach is necessary (Hox, 2010). Because ICCs in our study lie above 0.05 ($ICC_{\text{Salesperson's e-commerce promotion}} = 0.08$, $ICC_{\text{Customer's e-commerce revenue share}} = 0.14$), we analyzed our data using a multilevel approach. We estimated the model using Mplus 7 and a maximum likelihood estimator (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). The model includes the direct effects of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on the salesperson's e-commerce promotion and the effect of this variable on a customer's share of e-commerce revenue. Furthermore, we specified the two interaction effects: (1) salesperson's relational-selling orientation × customer's attitude toward e-commerce (notably, this constitutes a cross-level interaction, which we specified accordingly; Muthén & Muthén, 2012) and (2) salesperson's relational-selling orientation × competitors' personal selling focus. Model 1 in Table 2 shows the results.

In H_1, we proposed that a salesperson's relational-selling orientation has a negative effect on the salesperson's e-commerce promotion. The corresponding effect is negative and significant (b = −0.566, $p < .05$), which confirms the hypothesis.

In H_2, we argued that the negative effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation is less pronounced if a customer's attitude toward e-commerce is high. The interactive effect of the salesperson's relational-selling orientation and the customer's attitude toward e-commerce on the salesperson's e-commerce promotion is positive and significant (b = 0.283, $p < .01$). This means that a customer's attitude toward e-commerce moderates the effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on e-commerce promotion, confirming H_2. The corresponding interaction diagram is presented in Fig. 3 on the left.

Furthermore, we postulated in H_3 that the negative effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on the salesperson's e-commerce promotion is reinforced by competitors' personal selling focus. The interactive effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation and competitors' personal selling focus on the salesperson's e-commerce promotion is significantly negative (b = −0.380, $p < .05$), thus supporting H_3. Fig. 3 provides an interaction plot on the right.

Lastly, in H_4, we proposed that a salesperson's e-commerce promotion increases a customer's e-commerce revenue share. Our results confirm this effect (b = 0.161, $p < .05$) and thus support H_4.

To grant deeper insight into the nature of our effects, we performed moderated mediation analysis. Specifically, we estimated the conditional indirect effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on a customer's e-commerce revenue share via the salesperson's e-commerce promotion, at different levels of customers' attitudes toward e-commerce and competitors' personal selling focus (Preacher et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2010). Results, provided in Table 3, show that depending on the configuration of the moderators, the indirect effect of a salesperson's relational-selling orientation on a customer's e-commerce revenue share via the salesperson's e-commerce promotion can assume any direction. For most combinations, it is significantly negative or insignificant. Interestingly, for one combination (high customer's attitude toward e-commerce and low competitors' selling focus), the indirect effect even becomes marginally positive (b = 0.080, $p < .10$), suggesting that a relational-selling orientation actually fosters the penetration of e-commerce channels.

3.4. Robustness checks

To verify the robustness of our results, we conducted four supplemental analyses. First, in our main model, we controlled for a multitude of potentially intervening variables. While this allows us to reduce omitted variable bias, it may likewise give rise to overfitting the data and thus finding spurious effects. For this reason, we replicated our estimation without including control variables, leading to a simpler model specification. Results were fully in line with our results including control variables. This suggests that our results are not spurious but

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	M	SD	α	AVE	CR	V1	V2	V3	V4
V1: Customer's e-commerce revenue share (log)	0.565	1.26	—	—	—				
V2: Salesperson's e-commerce promotion	5.48	1.60	0.88	0.71	0.88	0.20**			
V3: Salesperson's relational-selling orientation	6.72	0.57	0.87	0.87	0.95	–0.07	–0.07		
V4: Customer's attitude toward e-commerce	3.74	2.02	—[a]	—[a]	—[a]	0.40**	0.24**	0.07	
V5: Competitors' personal selling focus	4.66	1.30	0.75	0.60	0.79	–0.06	–0.05	0.28**	–0.02

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed); M = mean, SD = Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha, AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability, [a]One-item variable.

substantial.

Second, the question arises as to whether our results generalize to different sales roles, such as hunter and farmers. To answer this question, we replicated our analysis while controlling for a salesperson's role. To this end, we used a survey question that asked respondents to indicate the number of hours they spend each week on acquiring new customers (M = 6.81, SD = 9.08) and the number of hours they spend on consulting existing customers (M = 34.96, SD = 10.95). We used these variables to calculate the "share of farming," dividing the latter variable by the sum of both variables (M = 0.85, SD = 0.10, min = 0.40, max = 0.98). We then repeated our estimation while controlling for the share of farming. We also tested whether the share of farming moderates any of our other effects. However, the share of farming had neither a significant main effect on e-commerce promotion nor an interactive effect with relationship orientation. Furthermore, all of our other effects remained stable in size and significance. Thus, in summary, we do not find empirical evidence that our effects differ by sales roles in our data set.

Third, given the low response rate of customers, our results may be subject to a selection bias. This danger is aggravated by the fact that we conducted the customer survey online. Specifically, it may well be that customers who are unlikely to use e-commerce are also less likely to participate in an online survey. To rule out that our results are unduly influenced by a selection bias, we repeated our estimation while using the correction procedure proposed by Heckman (1976). We therefore first estimated a probit model to predict each customer's decision to participate in the survey based on two covariates: the customer's revenue (which serves as an instrument) and the customer's share of e-commerce revenue. We then calculated the inverse Mill's ratio from the probit estimates and entered it as an additional predictor in our model (see Model 2 in Table 2). The results are fully in line with our main model. This verifies that that selection bias is not a major concern in our study.

Fourth, given our sample size of 220 customers nested in 68 salespeople, we replicated Models 1 and 2 using a Bayesian estimator rather than a maximum likelihood estimator (Lee & Song, 2004; Rouziou & Dugan, 2020).[2] We relied on non-informative priors and estimated the models using 20,000 iterations. The model yielded a potential scale reduction value of 1.009 (<1.1; Muthén & Muthén, 2012), which did not increase when replicating the model with 50,000 iterations. This indicates satisfactory convergence of our model. Results, provided in Models 3 and 4, align with our previous models. This further substantiates the robustness of our results.

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of results

E-commerce is becoming more and more important in the B2B sector (e.g., Wu & Kumar, 2018). Many companies aspire to greater efficiency through the use of e-commerce channels (Guenzi & Habel, 2020; Singh et al., 2019) and expect their sales staff to actively promote the use of e-commerce channels to their customers. However, salespeople often hesitate to promote e-commerce channels to their customers. Despite this problem's high practical relevance, the existing literature has largely neglected it. Our study shows that salespeople who are more relationally oriented are less likely to promote e-commerce channels to their customers. This effect could be due to the fact that these salespeople regard e-commerce as counterproductive to their goal of building and maintaining close personal relationships with customers. A customer's positive attitude toward e-commerce weakens this effect, while competitors' personal selling focus strengthens it.

4.2. Research issues

Our study contributes to at least four areas of literature. First, we provide initial insight into the research gap raised by Singh et al. (2019) and Ahearne and Rapp (2010, p. 110): "Does the salesperson influence the consumer in some way to adopt the technology? Can the salesperson make recommendations, facilitate the learning process, or provide information to motivate the consumer to use or avoid the technology?" Our study shows that a salesperson's promotion of e-commerce channels indeed leads customers to shift purchases to these channels. Future research in this literature stream should thus control for the salesperson's influence to develop more comprehensive models on customers' technology adoption and prevent omitted variable bias.

Second, to our best knowledge, our study is the first to integrate relational-selling theory (e.g., Arli et al., 2018; Weitz & Bradford, 1999) with goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2019). Prior studies on relational selling typically presuppose which behaviors constitute relational selling (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2007; Arli et al., 2018; Habel et al., 2020). In addition, some studies examine drivers that lead salespeople to engage in these behaviors (Ganesan, 1994; Guenzi et al., 2007; Guo & Ng, 2012). However, our study raises awareness that certain behaviors might not be intrinsically relational or non-relational. Instead, as derived from goal-setting theory, situational factors determine whether salespeople perceive a behavior (such as e-commerce promotion) to be conducive or counterproductive to their goal of building and maintaining customer relationships. While on average, e-commerce promotion emerges as a behavior *opposing* a relational-selling orientation, it can be characterized as a relational-selling strategy if customers have positive attitudes toward e-commerce and competitors do not focus on personal selling. With this finding, our study may pave the way to a more granular understanding of the phenomenon of relational selling.

Third, our study contributes to adaptive-selling theory (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). *Adaptive selling* refers to "the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 175). For example, prior literature shows that salespeople adjust their arguments to customers' needs (Alavi et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2006). Our study confirms these findings, because salespeople are more likely to promote e-commerce to customers who have a positive attitude toward e-commerce (see direct effect in Table 2). In addition, however, our study shows that this effect decisively interacts

[2] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

Table 2
Results of the study.

Path	Hypothesis	Model 1: Full Model Max. Likelihood	Model 2: Selection Model Max. Likelihood	Model 3: Full Model Bayes	Model 4: Selection Model Bayes
Main Links					
Salesperson's relational-selling orientation → salesperson's e-commerce promotion	H_1: –	–0.566**	–0.566**	–0.554*	–0.543*
Salesperson's e-commerce promotion → customer's e-commerce revenue share	H_4: +	0.161**	0.161**	0.158***	0.161***
Salesperson's relational-selling orientation → customer's e-commerce revenue share		–.202[n.s]	–.202[n.s]	–.211[n.s]	–.209[n.s]
Main Effect of Moderators					
Customer's attitude toward e-commerce → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		0.193***	0.194***	0.190***	0.192***
Competitors' personal selling focus → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		–.032[n.s]	–.031[n.s]	–.040[n.s]	–.029[n.s]
Interaction Effect					
Salesperson's relational-selling orientation × customer's attitude toward e-commerce → salesperson's e-commerce promotion	H_2: +	0.283***	0.283***	0.297***	0.297***
Salesperson's relational-selling orientation × competitors' personal selling focus → salesperson's e-commerce promotion	H_3: –	–0.380**	–0.380**	–0.392**	–0.374*
Controlled Effects					
Customer's revenue with salesperson → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		0.159**	0.162**	0.166**	0.209***
Customer's revenue with salesperson → customer's e-commerce revenue share		0.089**	0.089**	0.090*	0.090*
Salesperson's age → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		.009[n.s]	.009[n.s]	.007[n.s]	.006[n.s]
Salesperson's tenure → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		–0.030*	–0.030*	–0.029*	–0.028*
Salesperson's adaptive selling → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		–.056[n.s]	–.056[n.s]	–.055[n.s]	–.053[n.s]
Salesperson's task orientation → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		0.207**	0.208**	.198[n.s]	.204[n.s]
Heckman Selection Correction					
Inverse Mill's ratio → salesperson's e-commerce promotion		—	.052[n.s]	—	.802[n.s]
Model Fit					
Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)		1544.915	1546.836	—	—
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), sample-size adjusted		1549.632	1551.777	—	—

[n.s] not significant: $p > .10$, * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed). Unstandardized coefficients are shown.

with a salesperson's own needs, that is, the salesperson's relational-selling orientation. This finding offers an exciting avenue to extend adaptive-selling theory and potentially integrate it with goal-setting theory. Specifically, future research may strive to understand the intricate interplay of customer characteristics and salesperson characteristics in the formation of adaptive salesperson behaviors.

Fourth, the moderating effect of competitors' personal selling focus unveiled by our study suggests a possible "prisoner's dilemma" for salespeople, which opens a plethora of avenues for future research. In a prisoner's dilemma, actors would benefit most strongly if they cooperated. However, each actor has an incentive to deviate from cooperation and hereby achieve a short-term advantage (e.g., Andreoni & Miller, 1993; Axelrod, 1980). In our case, all competing salespeople in a territory could benefit in terms of efficiency if they focused on selling via e-commerce. However, once all competing salespeople have seized efficiency gains by reducing customer interactions, an individual salesperson could strengthen his or her customer relationships relative to the competition by refocusing on personal selling. Anticipating this, a salesperson might decide to keep selling personally rather than online in the first place. As one salesperson of the company we worked with summarized in a co-drive that one of the authors conducted: "If I don't drive out to the customer, the competitor will. I can't risk that." It could well be that this prisoner's dilemma contributed to the fact that the company stagnated at its 5.78% share of e-commerce revenue for the average customer.

4.3. Managerial implications

Our study has three important implications for management practice. First, our findings should sensitize managers to the fact that salespeople's recommendations to customers support the adoption of e-commerce channels. Thus, companies that wish their customers to buy more online can in fact use salespeople as multipliers. Specifically, salespeople may make it a habit to remind their customers that simple purchases (such as straight rebuys) can be efficiently placed in the company's online shop. As a result of such promotion, customers are more likely to shift transactions toward e-commerce, which potentially gives salespeople more time to focus on consultation or acquisition of new customers.

Second, our findings also reveal two potential dangers in placing too much emphasis on e-commerce. The first danger is revealed by the moderator *customer's attitude toward e-commerce*. Our results suggest that relationship-oriented salespeople fear that promoting their e-commerce channel could damage their relationship with customers who have a negative attitude toward e-commerce. The second risk relates to the moderator *competitors' personal selling focus*. Our findings suggest that relationally oriented salespeople fear that if they serve customers via e-commerce instead of personally, competitors can realize an advantage in the customer relationship. We encourage managers to carefully analyze whether and to what extent these fears of their sales staff are justified. For this purpose, salespeople may be requested to collect information on customers' attitude toward e-commerce and competitors' personal selling focus in the customer relationship management system. If predictive analytics reveals that these variables factually deteriorate the relationships with customers to whom e-commerce is promoted, managers may ask salespeople to refrain from promoting e-commerce to this segment in the future.

Third, however, if the fears of salespeople turn out to be unfounded, managers should sensitize relationally oriented salespeople to the fact that successfully promoting e-commerce can actually strengthen rather than threaten customer relationships (Guenzi & Habel, 2020; Lapoule & Colla, 2016; Montaguti et al., 2016). Furthermore, managers should set

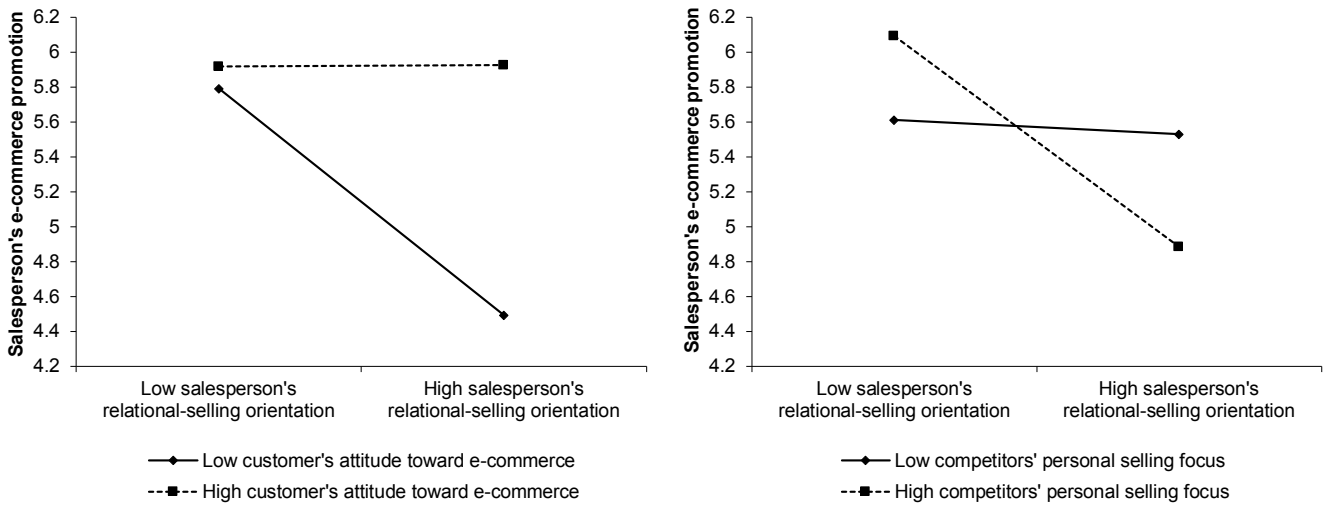

Fig. 3. Interaction Plots, Note: High/low levels refer to mean +/– one standard deviation.

Table 3
Conditional indirect effect of relational-selling orientation on e-commerce revenue share.

		Level of competitors' selling focus		
		Low	Medium	High
Level of customer's attitude toward e-commerce	Low	–0.104**	–0.182**	–0.261*
	Medium	–.011[n.s]	–0.091*	–0.170*
	High	0.080*	.000[n.s]	–.080[n.s]

[n.s] not significant: $p > .10$, * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed). Unstandardized coefficients are shown. Medium levels refer to the mean, high/low levels refer to the mean +/– one standard deviation.

goals related to the promotion of e-commerce channels. As derived from goal-setting theory, such goals might help counter salespeople's tendency not to promote e-commerce channels.

4.4. Limitations and avenues for future research

Our study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, we focus on the effect of relational-selling orientation on e-commerce promotion. Thus, we provide a partial rather than a total model, and it is likely that other factors co-determine whether salespeople promote e-commerce (Sarin et al., 2012). Future research should examine such factors to build a more comprehensive understanding of e-commerce promotion. As an example, salespeople may also refrain from promoting an e-commerce channel if they are afraid that they might be replaced by it (Guenzi & Habel, 2020). As Khusainova et al. (2018, p. 10) stated, "[salespeople] may be afraid that adoption of […] innovative technologies will lead to the automation of important aspects of their job activities and put their job at risk" and wondered "how to effectively motivate salespeople to adopt digital technologies and effectively operate in this transformative and changing context."

Secondly, our data comes from a B2B direct sales company with a focus on consumables and tools for professional users of fastening technology. This context exhibits three characteristics worth mentioning: (a) Selling in this company can be characterized as "street fighting": Every salesperson visits up to 15 customers a day, sales cycles are very short, and transaction volumes are low. Due to this context, the company's management regarded e-commerce as particularly promising to improve sales efficiency. (b) Customers of the company are traditional industries, such as workshops and construction sites. A reasonable assumption is that in these industries, the average customer has a lower affinity to use e-commerce than may be the case in other industries (e.g., advertising agencies). This is also evidenced by the fact that in our sample, attitude toward e-commerce is rather low (M = 3.74), competitors tend to focus on personal selling (M = 4.66), and only a minor share of revenue with customers is generated through the e-commerce channel (M = 5.78%). (c) Salespeople sell in a highly competitive environment. A typical customer purchases from several suppliers who all offer a similar product portfolio. This may also give rise to the potential "prisoner's dilemma" discussed previously. While the overall context of the company in our study is not uncommon for B2B industries, we encourage future researchers to replicate our results in different industries to verify their generalizability and carve out context-specific drivers of e-commerce promotion.

Third, our study's unit of analysis is the customer rather than the salesperson–customer interaction. More specifically, we examine drivers of a salesperson's general tendency to promote e-commerce to a customer. It may be interesting for future research to delve deeper into single salesperson–customer interactions and examine the specific selling situations in which salespeople do or do not promote e-commerce channels.

Fourth, our study does not distinguish how customers use the e-commerce channel. Instead, we focus on the share of revenue the company generates with a customer through the e-commerce channel. Future research may conceptualize and examine different ways in which customers use the e-commerce channel. For example, future research may differentiate (a) for which types of products e-commerce is used (e.g., simple vs. complex products) and (b) for which stages of the purchasing process e-commerce is used (e.g., informing vs. completing the transaction).

5. Summary and conclusion

Many B2B firms rely on their sales force to promote the firm's proprietary e-commerce channel to customers. In this paper, we examine the conditions in which salespeople comply with this request. Integrating relational-selling theory and goal-setting theory, we find that salespeople with a high relational-selling orientation are less likely to promote their firm's e-commerce channel, which results in a lower e-

commerce revenue share of these salespeople's customers. Relational-selling orientation reduces salespeople's promotion of the e-commerce channel more strongly if customers have a negative attitude toward e-commerce and when competitors put a strong focus on personal selling, because these factors lead salespeople to particularly fear for their customer relationships. We hope that these results are informative for managerial practice and instigate further academic research on the integration of salespeople and e-commerce channels.

Appendix A. Measures and data sources

Measure	Definition	Measures	Based on
Main variables			
Customer's e-commerce revenue share *(Level 1)*	Share of a customer's revenue that is generated through the online shop rather than the field sales force	• Objective company records[3]	—
Salesperson's e-commerce promotion *(Level 1)*	Degree to which the salesperson recommends to a customer to use the e-commerce channel	• The salesperson regularly recommends to use the online shop.[b,2] • Our contact person regularly informs us that we can also obtain information, order, and return products via the online shop.[b,2] • We know from our contact person that we can also use the online shop.[b,2]	McFarland et al. (2006)
Salesperson's relational-selling orientation *(Level 2)*	Degree of the salesperson's focus on a long-term relationship to the customer	• It's important to me to build a long-term relationship with customers.[b,1] • I am very interested in working with customers on a long-term basis.[b,1] • I expect my customers to work with me for a long time to come.[b,1] • In conversations with customers, it is very important to me to establish personal relationships with these customers.[b,1]	Ganesan (1994)
Customer's attitude toward e-commerce *(Level 1)*	Customer's general attitude toward using e-commerce channels and buying online	• How much do you like using the following ordering channels: online shop.[c,2]	Ha and Stoel (2009)
Competitors' personal selling focus *(Level 2)*	Degree to which a salesperson's competitors sell personally to customers	• In its sales strategy, our competition relies heavily on personal contact between salespeople and customers.[b,1] • Sales in our competition are mainly carried out by salespeople directly at the customer's premises.[b,1] • Our competition seeks to foster close relationships between its salespeople and customers.[b,1]	Jelinek et al. (2006)
Control variables			
Customer's revenue with salesperson *(Level 1)*	Amount of revenue that the salesperson is making with the customer	• Objective company records[3]	—
Salesperson's age *(Level 2)*	—	• How old are you?[a,1]	—
Salesperson's tenure *(Level 2)*	Number of years that a salesperson has been working in his or her position	• How many years have you been working in this company?[a,1]	—
Salesperson's adaptive selling *(Level 2)*	Degree to which the salesperson adapts his or her selling behavior to customers	• I use an individual sales technique for each customer.[b,1] • If I notice that my sales technique is not successful, it is easy for me to change it.[b,1] • I like to adapt my sales technique to the respective customer.[b,1] • It is easy for me to adapt my sales technique as soon as I realize that this is necessary.[b,1]	Spiro and Weitz (1990)
Salesperson's task orientation *(Level 2)*	Degree of the salesperson's focus on selling efficiently	• I make sales calls as efficient as possible.[b,1] • In sales conversation, I concentrate very much on the goal of the conversation.[b,1] • In sales conversations, I'm very goal-oriented.[b,1]	Homburg et al. (2011)

Scales: [a] Open text field; [b] 7-point Likert scale (anchored "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree"); [c] 7-point Likert scale (anchored "not at all" and "very much").

Measurement sources:[1] Salesperson survey; [2] Customer survey; [3] Objective company records.

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