



Relationship Management in Sales - Presentation of a Model with Which Sales Employees Can Build Interpersonal Relationships with Customers

Tobias Barthelt

University of Economics in Bratislava Faculty of Business Management

Department of Business Finance Bratislava, Slovak republic

Abstract: Sales companies are asking themselves how they can generate success in the future despite constant change and new influences. An important factor is the development of relationships between sales staff and customers, which must be demanded and promoted by companies so that it can be applied in sales practice. This includes training and education, but also the implementation of tools such as guides or models.

This work examines the necessity and methods of interpersonal relationship building. It was found that relationship building is crucial for sales success. The identified factors for successful interpersonal relationship building can be summarized as follows: i) trust, liking and appreciation; ii) private contacts and bonding; and iii) liability and credibility.

However, it has been shown that there is a discrepancy between the importance of relationship building and its actual implementation in professional practice.

This paper presents a model based on the research findings and offers salespeople and companies concrete recommendations for action. Barthelt's four-phase cycle model can improve sales activities and strengthen the interpersonal relationship between salespersons and customers. It provides practical guidance for the day-to-day work of salespeople and assists managers in promoting and implementing relationship building in daily practice specifically.

This work closes the research gap between theory and sales practice in interpersonal relationship building. It underlines its importance in a constantly changing and increasingly digitalized world.

JEL classification: M 20, O 30, Z 30

Keywords: Relationship building, Model, Sales training, Sales guide, Sales companies

1. Introduction

In March 2020, digitalization, which has progressed steadily in recent years, received an additional boost from the COVID-19 pandemic and changed the world of work immensely, especially in sales. The change in customer purchasing behavior is also forcing change. Sales companies were and are forced to change and adapt to the circumstances, which is changing the work of sales employees (Thonet, 2020, pp.17 ff.). Practice has shown us,

especially since March 2020, that volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity have taken hold in all areas of the economy. The daily work of a sales employee, in particular, has changed considerably. They start with contact restrictions and the use of new media for personal use, through the closure of companies, faltering payments and frightened people on the customer side. Increasing consolidation in business life and intense competition mean that providers are increasingly trying to achieve or defend their status as crucial providers (Gupta, Polonsky and Lazaravic 2019, p. 191).

One topic that has not changed and was already a decisive factor for success in sales before the COVID-19 pandemic is the relationship between the sales representative and the customer.

When discussing sales representatives, it is worth mentioning that the profession exists in different forms. There are telephone sales, stationary trade (e.g., DIY stores or car dealerships), retail (supermarkets, drugstores or clothing stores), key account managers or the classic sales force.

Service employees in the catering and hotel industry who directly interact with guests can also be categorized as sales staff.

In sales, the salesperson directly interacts with the customer and looks after them. The various service employees also sell hotel guests something in the different departments. In addition to the overnight stay, the concierge sells meals in the hotel's own restaurant, treatments in the spa area, cosmetic products and excursions. In addition to sales, especially in the luxury hotel industry, the aim is to provide guests with individual care so that they feel comfortable during their stay, generate revenue, and, ideally, become guests of the hotel again or even regular guests.

Experience has shown us that relationship building is a well-known topic. Most sales employees and customers value their relationship with their counterparts. Specific questions about what they mean by this and how they can build a relationship with their counterpart are often answered with a shrug.

Nevertheless, Germany's service quality has declined massively, especially since March 2020. Significantly increased waiting times, the discontinuation of services, the closure of brick-and-mortar stores and a deterioration in customer service over the phone are just a few examples.

To counteract this trend and remain successful on the market in the future, sales companies should focus on the issues responsible for sales success even before the pandemic and advancing digitalization.

Based on the theory that relationship building will continue to be a critical success factor in sales in the future, two overarching questions arise for sales companies:

What factors specifically characterize relationship-building with customers? And how is the topic of relationship building implemented in sales practice?

Various research methods were used to answer these questions, from literature research and expert interviews to an online survey. This was intended to ensure that data and facts from sales practice were generated from various sectors and professional groups to achieve this work's main objective: developing a model with which companies can sustainably improve their sales activities.

2. Literature Review

Koponen, Julkunen & Asai (2019, p. 238) see the development of long-term customer relationships alongside communication as essential for successful sales work. They also state that sales have developed in the direction of relationship selling, which sees sales as a process of focussing on securing, building and supporting long-term relationships with customers.

In this context, value co-creation between provider and customer plays a unique role. This joint value co-creation is a critical success factor for creating positive customer experiences and long-term customer relationships (Marcos-Cuevas, Nätti, Palo and Baumann, 2016, p. 97).

Zupancic (2019, p. 67) also refers to sales employees and their customer interaction as an essential success factor. He also emphasizes the importance of relevant skills in this regard and states, among other things, that a high

level of social skills and the ability to manage relationships well are essential and help to generate added value and underline the relevance of personal selling.

Gupta, Polonsky & Lazaravic (2019, p. 193) attribute a central role to the interaction between salespeople and buyers and see it as a success factor in modern sales. Therefore, salespeople and buyers are required to interact and enter close relationships.

Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal (2011, p. 407ff) identify five key drivers influencing sales performance and success in their meta-analysis. One of the drivers is the extent/degree of adaptability. It can be understood as using procedural and declarative knowledge to tailor the sales strategy to the customer's needs (Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal 2011, p. 421ff).

Melese & Weldeyes (2021, p. 1ff) also see the buyer-seller relationship as a critical factor in determining a sales employee's performance. Salespeople play an essential role in a highly competitive environment and have the vital function of relationship managers (Melese & Weldeyes, 2021, p. 10).

Ambrose, Anaza and Rutherford (2017, p. 16ff) also focus on the relationship between the buyer and the salesperson. They examine the connection between two key factors - the satisfaction (economic and social) of the buyer with the commitment of the buyer to the seller, as well as the influence of the duration of the relationship on the connection between the satisfaction of the buyer and their commitment to the seller. It is worked out that the seller's economic and social satisfaction influence his commitment, with economic satisfaction being attributed to the more significant influence. They also find that financial incentives are strong drivers of buyer commitment in long-term buyer-seller relationships, which increases as the relationship progresses. In contrast, social relationships are more relevant in the early phases of a buyer-seller relationship when it is still uncertain (Ambrose, Anaza and Rutherford, 2017, p. 24).

The philosophy of the customer also refers to a cooperative approach that focuses on building relationships as a success factor for sales. Central to relationship building within this approach is the person. Customers focus on the human relationship level. This includes fair dealings with one another, mutual respect, stability, loyalty and trust. In addition, credibility is also an important aspect (Kittinger, 2010, p. 69).

Crosno, Dahlstrom and Friend (2020, p. 161ff) also look at the relationship between buyer and seller, focusing on the influence of the seller's behavior on the quality of the relationship. One implication derived from the findings is that if relationship solidarity develops through a customer-centric approach to sales, managers should establish a culture that strives for long-term strategic partnerships and a direct sales approach that supports such an orientation (Crosno, Dahlstrom and Friend 2020, p. 161ff, 173f).

The prevailing literature mentions the topic of CRM in connection with relationship building in advancing digitalization.

As is evident from the above, companies are shifting from a product- and organization-centric approach to a customer-centric approach. An outside-in orientation aligns All company functional areas with customer needs, expectations, and experiences. The focus of corporate thinking and action on the customer is often reflected today in customer journey management, in which the customer journey is designed from the first contact to the purchase, use and termination of the relationship. Therefore, The focus is on customer management activities, for which the prediction and analysis of customer behavior and the findings are becoming increasingly important. At the same time, CRM is becoming increasingly important (Stadelmann and Neureiter, 2020, pp. 2f).

It is stated that CRM is an essential tool for achieving better business results through a customer-centric approach (Guerola-Navarro, Oltra-Badenes, Gil-Gomez and Gil-Gomez, 2021, p. 2669). The core theme of CRM is individual buyer-seller relationships, which should be as long-term as possible and create benefits for both parties (Sin, Tse Yim, 2005, p. 1266).

CRM places customers at the center of corporate actions and attitudes. CRM can be defined as follows (Helmke, Uebel and Dangelmaier, 2017, p. 7):

- By CRM, we mean the holistic processing of a company's customer relationship.

- Communication, distribution and offer policies should no longer be considered separately but should be aligned with customer needs in an integrated manner.
- The critical measure of CRM success is customer satisfaction, which indicates customer loyalty and the company's long-term value.

There are different types of CRM systems, such as collaborative, operational, and analytical CRM, to name just a few.

However, the topic of CRM takes place on a corporate level and not on an interpersonal level. This means that although companies can introduce a CRM system and provide it to a salesperson, it does not automatically ensure that the salesperson establishes an interpersonal relationship with their counterpart, the customer.

Even if the human side of relationship building has already been addressed in the prevailing literature, it can be stated that this level has only been touched upon. It has been established that the focus is on people and that they need specific personal skills. However, the link to the customer side is then made directly to the company and not to the person who works for the customer, i.e., for the company.

This work deals exclusively with the human perspective. The salesperson and the customer are not scientists who only act according to hard facts. The soft factors and, thus, the psychological side play a significant role, especially in the changed sales world. Moreover, the prevailing literature does not clarify how individual sales employees build relationships with their counterparts. We can confirm this as a gap in the supposedly perfect framework, which is reflected in a question that many salespeople ask themselves every day:

How do I specifically build an interpersonal relationship with my customer?

And it is precisely this question that is answered by Barthelt's model, which is presented in this paper.

In addition, three research phases are used to answer the question of which factors characterize interpersonal relationship building.

3. Research Methodology

A mixed methods approach was chosen for the research. The research is based on a systematic literature review (SLR) underpinning the classic literature review. In various databases, specific parameters were used to examine the findings of other authors on the topic of the work.

In the second research phase, 16 managers and experts from the sales and hotel industry were interviewed. People from companies in various sectors, such as the automotive industry, the IT sector or traditional field sales, were selected to ensure diversification among the sales experts.

In the third research phase, an online survey was conducted using Microsoft Forms. The target group consisted of four professional groups that were in direct and personal contact with customers daily. Due to the topic of the study, the focus was on the sales occupational group. In addition, employees from the trade, catering and hotel sectors were also surveyed. Care was taken to ensure that the employees worked in as many different companies and sectors as possible. A total of 137 high-quality responses were generated.

3.1. Systematic Literature Review

The first research phase consisted of a SLR. The SLR aimed to discover what has already been published about relationship building in sales or the hotel industry. The aim was to determine how relationship building is implemented in professional practice. The SLR also looked for models, illustrations, and guidelines that had been produced on the subject of relationship building.

A systematic search was conducted in four highly reputable economic databases for studies investigating relationship building in sales or the hotel industry. As the topic of this thesis has an economic scientific and sociological background, the author followed the recommendations of the Saxon State, Regional and University Library and the supervisor and searched the databases Web of Science, Scopus, EconLit and Business Source Complete (via EBSCO, Host).

The author screened each individual hit. The first step was to analyze the title of the hit. This revealed that many hits did not match the topic because, for example, they dealt with relationship building in other areas. The abstract was read and analyzed for hits with titles that indicated a sales or marketing-related topic. We searched for statements about interpersonal relationship building. Attention was also paid to the issues of sales training, sales training, guidelines and models relating to sales. In stationary and interpersonal sales, as well as in digital sales. The complete article was read and analyzed if these terms/contents were found in the abstracts.

Despite this approach, no studies could be found that would be helpful for this dissertation. The entire process is shown in the following PRISMA diagram:

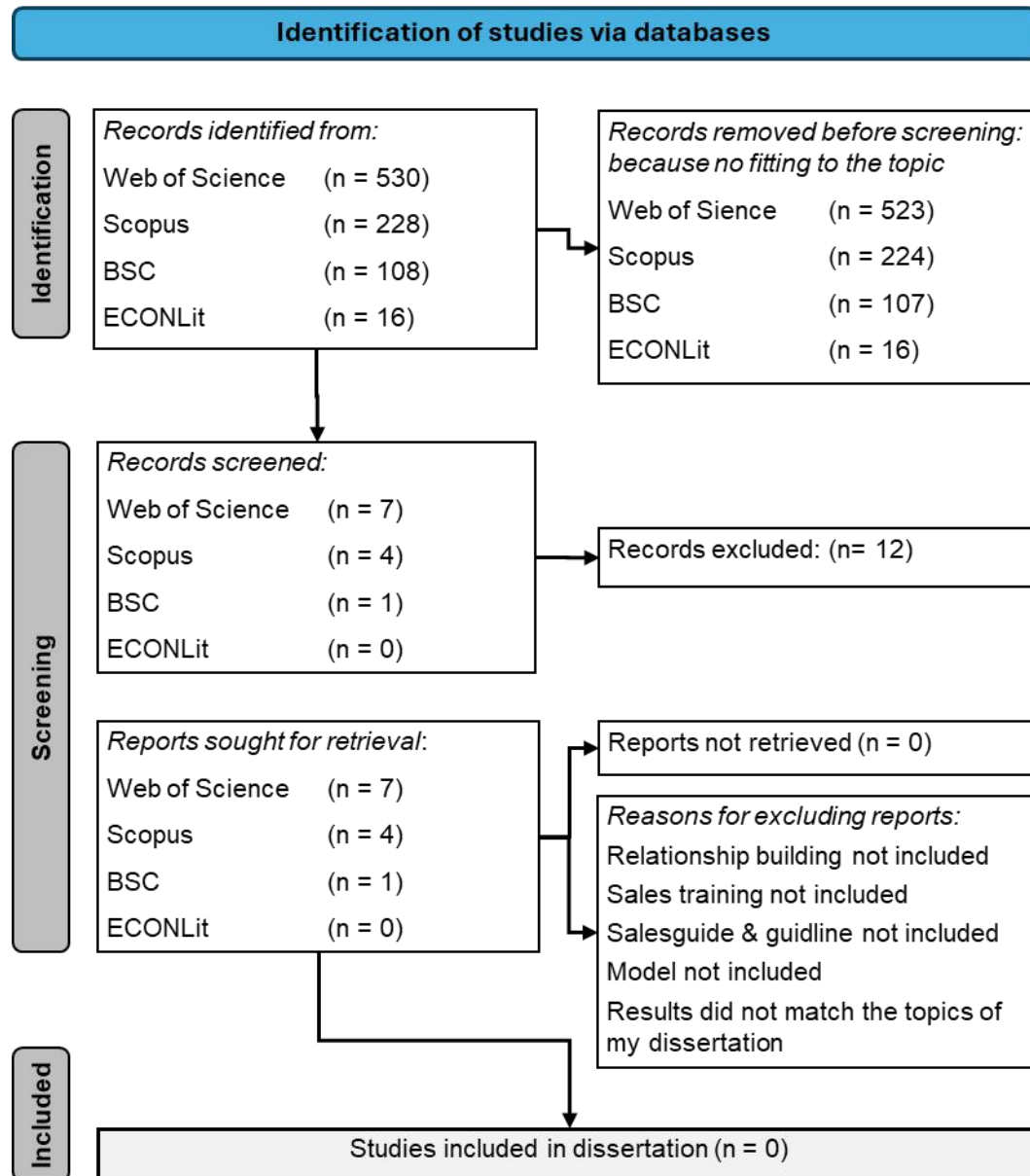


Figure 1: Characteristics rated as necessary by sales experts for relationship-building

Both the literature review and the SLR have shown that no concrete models or recommendations for action were found in the prevailing literature with which a salesperson can build an interpersonal relationship with the customer. However, expert interviews and an online survey were conducted to answer this question in the context of this thesis. As the SLR did not yield any findings that would be helpful for this dissertation, the SLR will not be used or mentioned in the following chapters.

3.2. Expert Interviews

In the second research phase, semi-structured expert interviews were selected as a qualitative research method to answer the research questions. Expert interviews are a proven method that allows researchers to gain in-depth insights into complex topics by interviewing experts in a specific field. A certain flexibility characterizes the methodology for this type of interview. At the same time, a predefined structure is in place to ensure that all relevant aspects are covered during the interview. Sixteen managers and experts from sales and the hotel industry were interviewed. The selection was based on their position and professional experience. Diversification in terms of industry and position held was also to be ensured. Most of the experts also have many years of international professional experience, which also reflects international perspectives. They comprised five managing directors or CEOs, five sales managers and three successful salespeople. The following table shows the individual sectors, positions and respective professional experience:

Professional group	Industry	Position	Professional experience
Distribution	Automobile	Managing Director	> 30 years
	Automobile	Sales Manager	> 15 years
	Automobile	TOP Distributors Germany	> 15 years
	Trade / Craft	Manager National Key Account	> 30 years
	Trade / Craft	CEO	> 30 years
	Trade / Craft	Regio Sales Manager	> 30 years
	IT	Head of Corporate Sales	> 20 years
	IT	Managing Director	> 30 years
	IT	Senior Key Account Manager	> 20 years
	Food / Distribution	Senior Key Account Manager	> 15 years
	Energy	Sales Manager	> 25 years
	Clothing / Distribution	Managing Director	> 30 years
	Service	Managing Director	> 25 years
Hotel industry/gastronomy	5-star superior / star gastronomy	General Manager	> 30 years
	5-star superior / star gastronomy	General Manager	> 30 years
	5-star superior / star gastronomy	General Manager	> 20 years

Table 1: List of persons interviewed

The reason for interviewing experts from the hotel industry is that sales and the hotel industry can be compared due to interpersonal contact with the customer or guest. Sales also occur in the hotel industry, although a service employee at the reception of a hotel, for example, would not be directly categorized as a sales activity. As the

interviewees are regular customers in their private lives and have an overarching view of all areas of their hotel due to their work, it was helpful to obtain the opinion of these experts.

An interview guide was created for the semi-structured expert interviews. The questions aimed to identify factors that make up the relationship between salespersons and customers or service employees and guests, as well as to obtain information on how relationships are shaped in professional practice and what significance the topic has in the orientation of sales companies and hotels. The guidelines were designed so that they could be completed within one hour. A total of 26 or, in the hotel industry, 27 main questions were asked, with the answer "yes" or "no" determining whether further sub-questions, such as "how often," were asked.

The guide is divided into five parts:

1. Introduction to the interview
2. About the person (expert)
3. Personal opinion
4. Company (position)
5. Farewell

The interviews were conducted in person using a guide and recorded digitally. The recordings were then transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA software. Principal codes and subcodes were created inductively and deductively about the two research questions to systematically analyze the experts' statements. The three main codes

- General information on the topic of relationship-building
- Factors relationship-building
- Interview questions

The survey asked whether companies provide employees with guidelines and offer sales training courses that deal with relationship building. The experts also asked which factors characterize relationship building between sales staff and customers.

3.3. Online Survey

In the third research phase, an online survey was conducted using Microsoft Forms to collect data from many participants from the four professional groups:

- Distribution
- Craft
- Hotel industry
- Gastronomy

The survey aimed at employees in direct contact with customers and guests.

The selection of an online survey made it possible to gather various opinions and experiences from different sectors and companies. The questionnaire was based on the results of the expert interviews and comprised up to 17 questions. It was designed to be answered within ten minutes and consisted of selection, yes/no, and scale questions.

The questionnaire is divided into four parts:

- About the person
- Personal opinion
- Professional practice
- Company/employer

Before the survey began, the participants were greeted with an introduction by the author, an acknowledgment, and information about anonymity. In addition, the research topic and the reason for the survey were briefly explained.

The survey then began with personal questions in which participants were asked about their birth year and the industry in which they work.

In the second part, "Personal opinion," participants were asked what factors they thought characterized building people-to-people relationships. Here, the participant could choose several answers.

The third part dealt with professional practice. This part consisted of two overarching questions, each subdivided into scale questions. While three statements were to be evaluated for one central question, the second main question had four to six statements, depending on the occupational group. The two main questions and the associated statements were designed to determine what the participants do in their day-to-day work to build relationships. The respective statements could be answered with four different answer options ("applies"; "tends to apply"; "tends not to apply"; "does not apply").

The fourth part, "Company/employer," consisted of up to five yes/no questions. Respondents were asked whether their current company/hotel had a sales or service policy and whether this included the topic of relationship building. Respondents were also asked if there is any sales or communication training and if relationship building is taught as part of this training. Finally, respondents were asked whether their company offers a CRM system.

The survey generated 137 analyzable responses. The aim was to check whether the results from the expert interviews were confirmed or refuted and whether further insights could be gained to answer the research questions and develop Barthelt's model.

The responses were exported to Excel and analyzed using Jamovi. The multiple-response questions were surveyed regarding the frequency of reactions and presented graphically. The yes/no questions were analyzed for statistical significance using chi-square tests. The scale questions were analyzed descriptively and presented graphically as bar charts and box plots.

About the number of responses, it should be mentioned that a wide-ranging survey of external providers was deliberately avoided. It was essential to the author that only people in the target group were interviewed and that all participants work for different employers. In this way, it can be guaranteed that the statements are authentic and have a specific validity due to their quality.

3.4. Statistical Procedures

Statistical evaluations were only carried out for the results of the third research phase, i.e., the questionnaire. Quantitative information was only collected in this phase.

The evaluations include descriptive analyses.

Cross-tabulations or the nominal dichotomous results (yes-no questions) were also created for chi-square independence tests. Bar charts showing the scatter parameters and box plots were used to illustrate the results.

All evaluations were based on the statistical program package 'R,' operated via the 'Jamovi' interface.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the expert interviews and the online survey. Barthelt's model is also offered at the end of the chapter.

4.1. Expert Interviews

The experts surveyed agree that building relationships in sales is essential for success. They emphasize that customer relationships serve as a differentiating factor and that sales targets can be achieved more quickly.

Despite advancing digitalization, the emotional component of relationship building will remain important. According to the experts, people will continue to want to buy and be served by people in the future, even in the high-priced service and luxury hotel industry.

The 16 experts surveyed identified ten features that characterize relationship building:

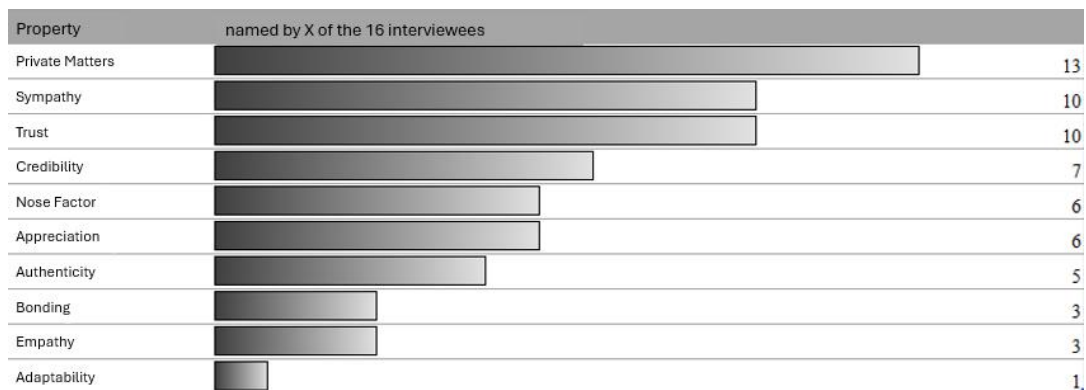


Figure 2: Characteristics rated as necessary by sales experts for relationship-building

Private

- Show interest in the customer's person and share your private information
- Personal discussions/topics outside of business
- Shared experiences (eating out or attending sporting events)

Sympathy and Nose Factor

- Mutual sympathy, often described as "the chemistry must be right" or "good feeling."
- The customer/guest must have the feeling that you are interested in them and value them as an individual

Trust

- Definition of relationship building with the word 'trust'
- Share your private information
- Trust is created through honesty and reliability

Credibility

- This also includes the 'honesty' factor
- Statements/promises must be valid and honored

Authenticity

- Genuine interest in the customer and honesty are essential
- If sales staff or service employees come across as artificial or dishonest, this is quickly recognized and undermines the relationship
- Authenticity is also demonstrated by the fact that mistakes are openly admitted, and the customer realizes that the salesperson is genuinely interested in finding a solution

Appreciation

- Without appreciation, trust problems arise, and it is not possible to build a relationship
- Begins with punctuality
- Arises from small or individual attention and the knowledge of personal information

Bonding

- Develops through private topics, and trust ultimately grows from this
- Is achieved through regular contact via personal calls or messages
- For example, sending birthday or Christmas cards leads to the 'Private.'

Empathy and Adaptability were only mentioned to a lesser extent and are therefore not explained in more detail.

It can be seen that although the experts mentioned ten different characteristics, which, in their opinion, should be understood as relationship-building, these are often interlinked or mutually dependent. The experts emphasized that relationship building is usually neglected in sales/service, although it is essential for success. Positive examples of employees who actively build relationships are rare and often depend on personal initiative or good leadership.

Some of the 16 experts surveyed stated that their companies provide guidelines. There are guidelines in 11 companies, but relationship building is only mentioned in six and dealt with in more detail in only one - however, the concrete "how" regarding the implementation of interpersonal relationship building is missing.

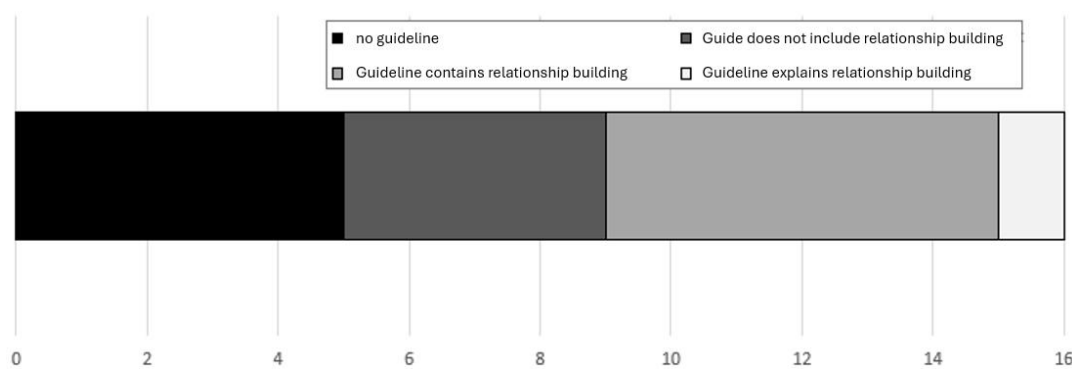


Figure 3 : Role of relationship building in the sales guidelines

About sales training, 14 out of 16 companies offer this, but relationship building is only trained in isolated cases. In one company, relationship building is trained as an "interpersonal part" during the induction but not afterward. It then depends on the direct manager whether what has been learned is applied in day-to-day sales or not. One expert reported on a one-off training series that included building a bond with the customer without regular repetition.

When asked, none of the 16 experts mentioned that any companies they work and have worked with emphasize relationship building in their sales orientation.



Figure 4 : Role of sales training

4.2 Online Survey

With the help of the online survey, it was possible to gain insights into other companies and whether the experts' experiences were confirmed. It was also possible to gain insights into the professional practice of many different company employees about relationship building.

One hundred thirty-seven participants from four professional groups (sales, hotel industry, trade and catering) participated in the survey.

Table 2: Number of participants in the online survey by occupational group

Professional Group	Number of participants
Distribution	73
Gastronomy	19
Craft	18
Hotel Industry	27
Overall result	137

Among other things, they were asked which factors they consider essential for building relationships. The specified characteristics result from the expert interviews:

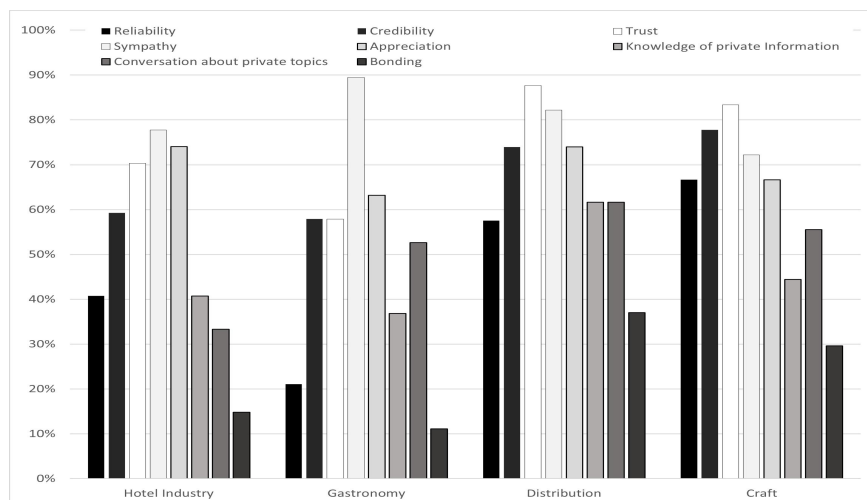


Figure 5 : Proportion of mentions of the characteristics - sorted by occupational group

The answers can be categorized into three superordinate groups - further referred to as factors:

- Private contacts & Bonding
- Liability & Credibility
- Appreciation, Trust & Sympathy

Properties	Nominations	
Private contacts, Bonding		184
Liability, Credibility		167
Appreciation, Trust, Sympathy		324

Figure 6 : Proportion of mentions of the identified characteristics bundled into factors

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The online survey results confirm that conversations about private topics and knowing private information about the customer are essential in sales to build a personal relationship and understand the customer better. This creates sympathy, which is necessary for building an interpersonal relationship.

When asked whether the respective companies provide their employees with a guide, the respondents answered as follows:

Table 3: Percentage of statements that a guideline is available

		Professional group				
		Gastronomy	Craft	Hotel industry	Distribution	Total
no	observed	11	13	14	40	78
	expected	10.82	10.25	15.4	41.6	78.0
Yes	observed	8	5	13	33	59
	expected	8.18	7.75	11.6	31.4	59.0
Total	observed	19	18	27	73	137

Of the 59 participants who said yes to being provided with a guide, 31 stated that relationship building was a separate section in the guide.

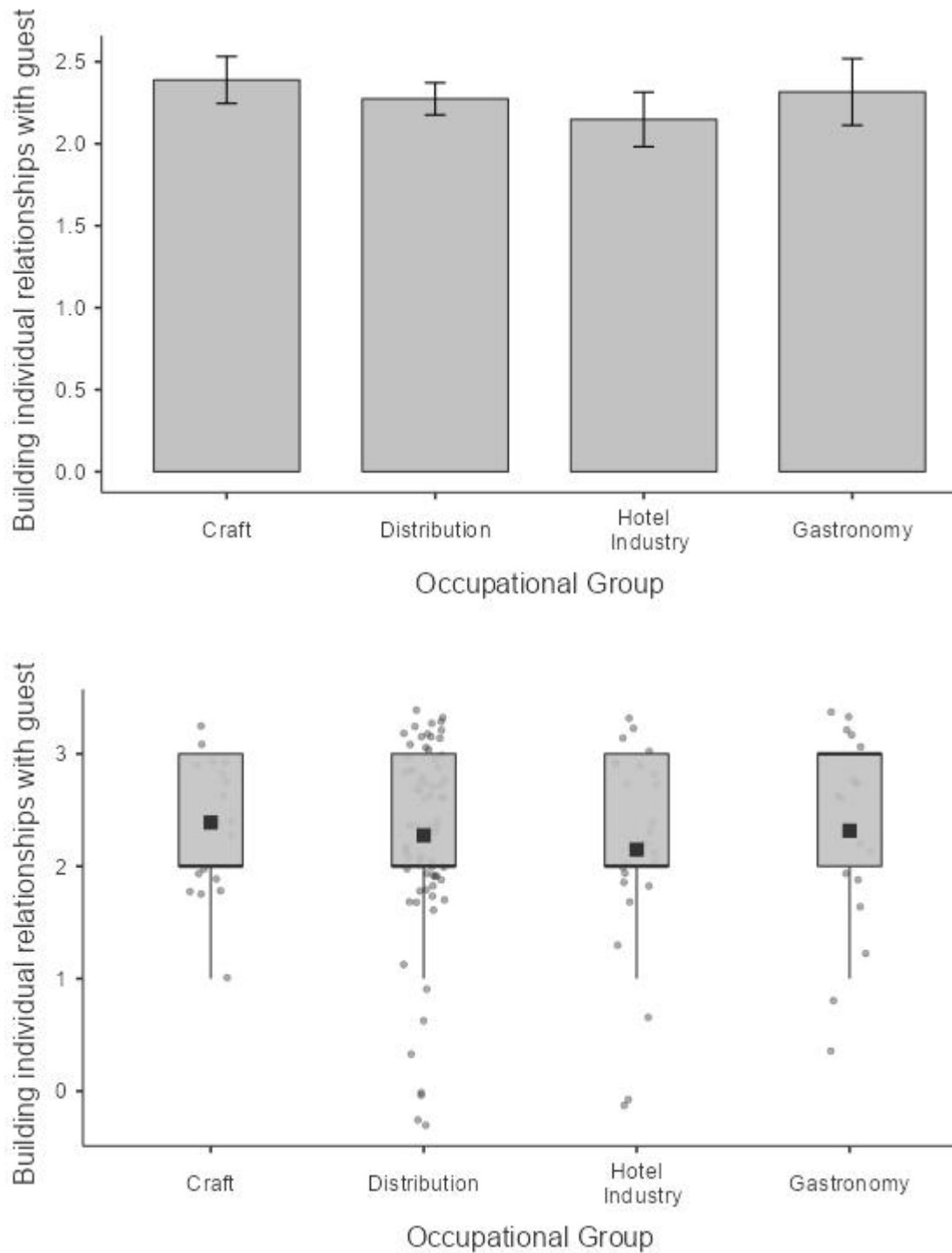
When asked whether the company they work for offers sales training, the participants responded as follows:

		Occupational group				
		Gastronomy	Craft	Hotel industry	Distribution	Total
no	observed	14	13	12	23	62
	expected	8.60	8.15	12.2	33.0	62.0
Yes	observed	5	5	15	50	75
	expected	10.40	9.85	14.8	40.0	75.0
Total	observed	19	18	27	73	137

Table 4: Share of companies with sales training by occupational group

Seventy-five participants answered this question in the affirmative. Forty participants stated that relationship building is part of these training courses.

At the same time, the participants unanimously confirmed that they personalize the relationship-building process. This can be seen from the fact that the mean value in all four occupational groups is over 2 (tend to agree).

Figure 7: Building relationships with customers/guests individually - by occupational group

4.3. Barthelt's Model

As mentioned at the beginning, the aim is to develop a model sales staff can use to build an interpersonal relationship with their customers. This is based on the results of the research phases described above:

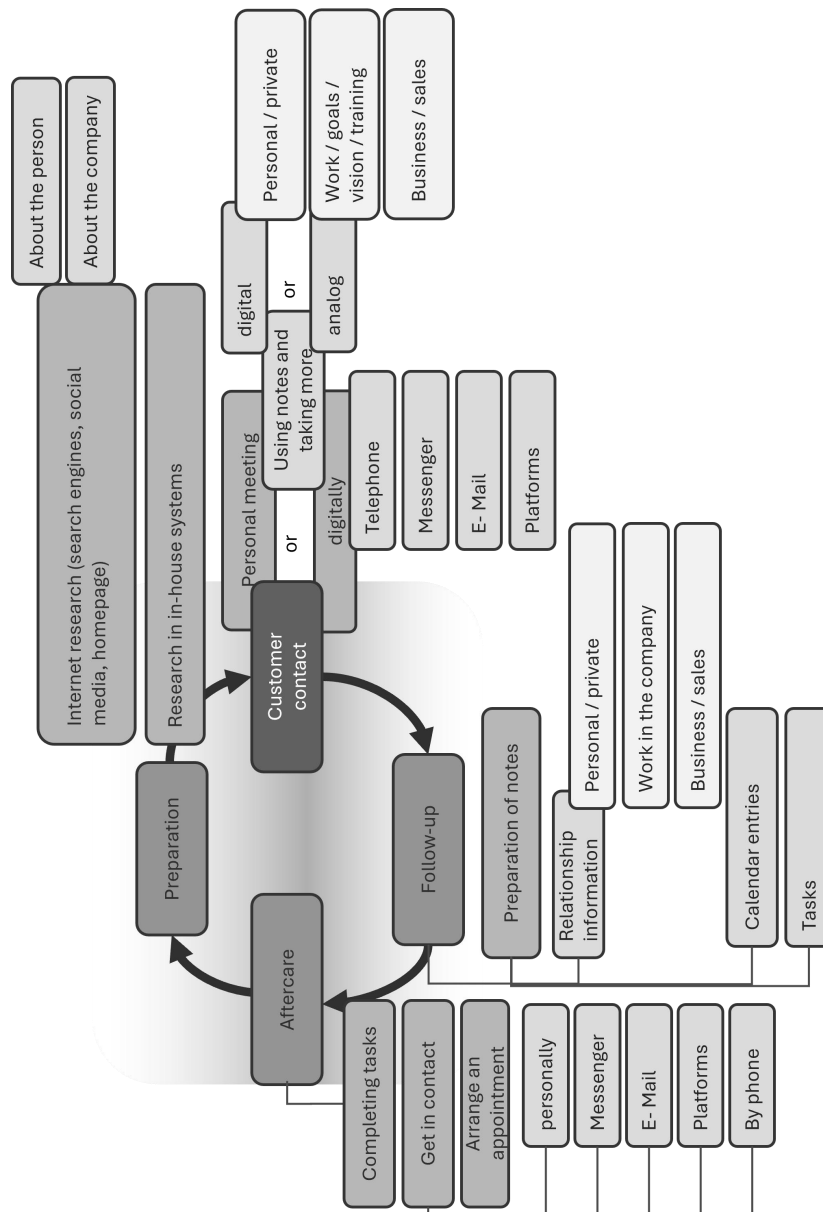


Figure 8: Barthelt's model

The basis of Barthelt's model is formed by the factors that characterize interpersonal relationship building. The aim is to achieve these factors with the help of Barthel's model so that the salesperson builds up an interpersonal relationship with their customer and thus generates success in sales.

It represents a cycle that starts all over again. It does not matter whether you are looking after a new customer for the first time or an existing customer for the second time.

Relationship building is to be understood as part of a sales process. The 'relationship building' part can be divided into four different phases:

4.3.1. Preparation

As part of the preparation, research should be carried out on the person with whom the salesperson is conducting the conversation and the company for which the person (= customer) works. This can be done primarily on the internet via search engines, websites and social media. Especially in their private lives, many people post things on social media so that information about hobbies, interests, friends and family can be obtained from strangers before the first conversation. Researching the person's private life (hobbies, interests, recent vacation destinations, etc.) and professional life (position held, length of service, previous professional positions, etc.) is essential. In the company's case, it is necessary to find out the company's fields of activity, where the company operates geographically, how many people are employed there and whether any news is reported in the media, such as expansions or mergers. This research can also be conducted via the Internet and internal company systems, such as CRM.

Knowing private information about the customer and the customer's business lays the foundation for successful customer contact and can immediately create trust and sympathy. In addition, detailed preparation makes it easier for the salesperson to talk about private topics so that the focus is not directly on the professional context. The two aspects, "private topics" and "away from the professional context," were mentioned very frequently by the experts in the expert interviews about successful relationship building.

4.3.2. Customer Contact

It is essential to take notes during customer contact. It doesn't matter whether the customer contact takes place in person or digitally. It can be helpful to note one or two pieces of information during the preparation phase, mainly if much data has already been generated before the customer's contact. The salesperson is free to choose how notes are created. It doesn't matter whether they keep them in analog or digital form. The decisive factor is the content, i.e., the salesperson notes private information, information about the customer's professional context, topics relating to business or sales and the tasks resulting from the contact, so-called to-dos.

They prepare the basis for these notes before the actual customer contact. The information gathered during the preparation can be addressed during customer contact or supported with questions. By asking questions and ensuring that the salesperson speaks much less, the customer is encouraged to speak. It is essential that the salesperson leads the conversation with questions and covers the three areas of private life: the company and the actual sale.

In this way, the salesperson not only shows interest in the customer as a person and at the same time appreciates them but also has the opportunity to build sympathy and a bond through private topics such as shared interests and hobbies. The customer doesn't feel like they're in a pure sales pitch, where it's just about making a purchase, but is perceived as a person. However, as topics relating to the business are also asked about, an authentic and professional impression is created simultaneously. In addition, the customer is appreciated for his work and his company. The aim is to differentiate yourself from other salespeople/companies you compete with.

The following things could or should be asked in the three different areas:

- Personal/private matters:
- Hobbies, interests
- Marital status/situation (married, children, pets)
- Date of birth
- Shared environment/friends
- Place of residence
- Vacation destinations
- Own home (house/apartment)
- Position / Goals / Vision / Training:

- Owner/role/function?
- Authorizations?
- Period of employment?
- Professional history, training, studies?
- Goals/vision (personal and in or with the company)?
- Let us show you the company
- Business / Sales (entering the world of the customer):
- Is the company for which the sales representative works known?
- Experience with other suppliers in this area?
- What are the expectations of the salesperson and the company?
- What is the need?
- Are there any problems / current pain points?

The information generated during preparation must be addressed and checked to ensure it is current.

The combination of the personal/private and the questions about the customer's activity or business does not give the impression that you are only contacting the customer for a private conversation but that you are a severe salesperson. This fosters the qualities of trust and appreciation. At the same time, the focus is on the business and the person, creating sympathy, private contact and loyalty. These are all characteristics and factors that were frequently mentioned not only by the experts but also by the participants in the online survey.

The three areas of questions can all be summarized under relationship information and should all be asked during customer contact. It is not a question of asking all questions in the initial contact. In the course of the collaboration, however, the aim should be to find out the information listed so that a long-term relationship can be established and maintained.

4.3.3. Follow-up

After contacting the customer, the notes need to be reprocessed and sorted. It is helpful to divide this into three blocks:

1. Relationship information

- What private and personal information could be found with the above questions?
- What information could be obtained about the customer's activity and career?
- What information could be generated about the customer's world?

2. Calendar entries

Dates such as birthday, length of service, company anniversaries, the year of graduation such as master craftsman's certificate or similar, and the first contact with the customer and the next agreed appointment should be entered immediately in the follow-up in the calendar. If no follow-up appointment has been made, the salesperson should set a new date for when they will next contact the customer. Maintaining the calendar shows that the salesperson is committed and creates lasting sympathy, appreciation and trust. Everyone likes to be congratulated on their birthday, especially when you don't expect a person to contact you about their birthday or anniversary.

3. Tasks

Tasks are the so-called to-dos. These things result from customer contact and must be completed by the salesperson. This can be the preparation of an offer or answering queries, as well as the sending of information material. Thorough completion of to-dos not only strengthens liability but also credibility and trust.

4.3.4. Aftercare

In the aftercare, the customer gets contacted, either in person or digitally, to send them the offer, provide answers to any queries, thank them for the order, inquire about the goods or services received, or inquire about or discuss private topics discussed during the contact (e.g., soccer results from the weekend, stories about the recent vacation, etc.). Every contact with the customer should be used to reinforce the various characteristics or factors that characterize relationship building. Following up on the ordering and delivery process creates trust and credibility. Answering open questions creates appreciation and liability. Addressing private topics that were discussed in the previous contact strengthens the bond and ensures further sympathy.

During this contact, a new appointment should be made with the customer, as noted in the salesperson's calendar. If no new appointment is made, the salesperson should make an entry in their calendar for the next time they contact the customer. Otherwise, there is a risk that there will be no contact for too long, and the trust, sympathy, etc., that has been built up will diminish again. Continuous contact by the salesperson is part of relationship building. There will come a time when the customer will proactively get in touch once the interpersonal relationship and a bond have been established.

Before the next customer contact, preparations are made again, and Barthelt's model cycle starts all over again.

In summary, according to experts and respondents, the individual steps of Barthelt's model cover all three factors or eight characteristics that characterize interpersonal relationship building. Suppose the steps outlined are implemented in total. In that case, there is a high probability that the salesperson will build up an interpersonal relationship with the customer and thus retain the customer and the company for which the salesperson works.

Even though Barthelt's model is aimed at all sales companies and salespeople at all career levels, there are certainly companies or salespeople who cannot apply the model holistically. For example, the stationary food retail trade (B2C) should be mentioned here, as the sales staff there cannot prepare for every customer contact due to their activity and the number of customers. This example is not the end of the list of companies that cannot use the model. The same applies to the restaurant and hotel industry. Here, the model is increasingly used in high-priced restaurants and luxury hotels, where guests expect a certain standard and regular guest relationships are relatively more likely to occur or, from the company's point of view, must happen. Nevertheless, individual elements of this model can always be used by employees who are in direct contact with customers. For example, the employee at the checkout of a food retailer can and should talk to customers about private issues and know their regular customers who regularly come into the store. They should also take customer queries or comments seriously and answer them so that customers feel valued. From the company's point of view, it should be important to how its sales employees affect customers and interact with them, as they are in direct competition with other companies. This can also be projected onto restaurant chains or standard 3-star hotels in tourist areas. It is up to each individual employee to decide whether or not customers will continue to buy from the company in the future.

5. Discussion

This chapter is dedicated to the discussion and interpretation of the results. This discussion aims to highlight the significance and relevance of the data collected and explore the theoretical implications. This work's possible limitations and methodological challenges will be discussed by critically reflecting on the findings obtained. In addition, potential avenues for future research are also identified from the present results.

5.1. Interpretation of the Results

As part of the research, 16 expert interviews were conducted in addition to a systematic literature review, followed by an online survey with 137 participants. The aim was to find out what the experts in sales understand by relationship building and how the topic is lived in professional practice and promoted by the companies.

This systematic literature review determined that no publications on this work explain or present the 'how' of building an interpersonal relationship with the customer.

In the 16 expert interviews, it became clear that the experts agree that relationship building is essential for success in sales now and in the future. The emotional component cannot be replaced despite advancing digitalization, so personal contact between sales staff and customers will remain important.

When asked what they understood by relationship building, the experts named ten different factors (referred to as 'characteristics' in this study), eight of which were considered in the evaluation due to the number of other mentions.

The most frequently mentioned factors or characteristics were 'private' and 'likeability,' and 'nose factor,' whereby the latter can be summarized with 'likeability.' By "private," the experts mean that the salesperson should show interest in the customer as a person and ask questions outside of the professional environment. Asking for private information such as date of birth, hobbies, interests, vacation destinations, the customer's family, etc., and disclosing personal information not only ensures that the salesperson and customer get to know each other but also creates a relationship between the salesperson and customer. Shared experiences such as eating out together, attending sporting events or introducing each other and the experts' employers' professional topics should take a back seat, especially before or at the start of the collaboration.

The experts from the hotel industry generally confirm these statements. The points about putting shared private experiences and collaboration or professional topics in the background do not apply to the hotel industry and service due to the nature of the work.

Other descriptions for 'likeability' and 'nose factor' were 'the chemistry must be right,' 'liking,' 'good feeling,' and 'positive gut feeling.' The experts agree that mutual sympathy creates a relationship between a salesperson, a customer or service employee, and a guest.

The eight properties mentioned can be categorized under the three factors

- Private contacts & Bonding.
- Liability & Credibility.
- Appreciation, Trust & Sympathy.

be summarized.

One hundred thirty-seven participants were surveyed as part of the online survey. When asked what they understand by interpersonal relationship building with customers or guests, the factors 'appreciation, trust and sympathy' received the most responses, with 318 mentions. This was followed by 'Private contacts and loyalty' with 176 mentions. The factor 'liability and credibility' received 164 mentions. This shows that the participants largely confirm the experts' statements. With 73 out of 137 participants, the sales professional group made up more than 50% of the participants. The experts and the participants in the online survey agree that both 'private matters' and sympathy coupled with trust make up an interpersonal relationship.

The question now arises about how a salesperson obtains private information and generates sympathy with the customer to build trust or, ultimately, a relationship. Only one company provides its sales staff with a guideline that at least 'somewhat' addresses relationship building. However, the specific 'how' of implementation is not explained.

According to the experts, sales training on relationship building is only offered in one company as part of the induction process. Here, it is part of the "interpersonal part" of the training. However, the relevant expert added

that relationship building is no longer trained afterward and depends on the direct manager whether what has been learned is applied and practiced in day-to-day sales. Relationship-building is no longer enforced in daily practice if the transfer does not happen directly on the first day after the induction. It should also be mentioned that the manager does not receive any training on the topic of relationship building either, so it depends solely on the manager himself, depending on how long he has been employed in the company and how long ago the induction took place, whether he still lives the relationship building in his everyday working life or not.

Even in their private lives, in which the experts act as customers, they find that sales staff rarely build relationships with them. This suggests that many other companies and the experts' employers do not promote relationship building. 'Many more' remains undefined in this context, as this was not part of the survey and an exact number of companies in which the experts act as customers would not be practicable due to the many parameters. Nevertheless, a trend can be derived as described.

59 of the 137 participants in the online survey stated that their employer provided them with a guide. Thirty-one stated that relationship building was a separate section in this guide. The anonymous online survey does not reveal whether the 31 participants work in different companies. Furthermore, it is not possible to give a detailed explanation of relationship building and what the participants understand in a separate section. The company of one expert also provides the sales staff with a guide in which relationship building is a separate category. However, as already explained, the 'how' is not explained. It is also impossible to determine whether the 'how' is described in the guide at the companies where the 31 participants work. However, it can be stated that only 22% of the participants have access to a guide provided by their employer in their day-to-day work.

As part of the online survey, participants were asked whether the company they work for offers sales training and whether relationship building is practiced as part of this training. A total of 40 participants stated that relationship building is trained. As with the guidelines, it is impossible to deduce with certainty the intensity and extent to which relationship building is trained. Nor does this result provide any information about the content. Whether the specific 'how' is trained remains unclear.

Nevertheless, it can be stated that only 29% of participants receive training on relationship building. It was noted in advance that only 22% of participants can use a guide for their professional relationship-building practice. The experts all agreed that relationship building is essential for the future success of sales companies. Nevertheless, based on the results, most companies do not appear to be pushing relationship building.

Concerning the factors or characteristics mentioned by the experts, which, in their opinion, characterize the relationship building between the salesperson and the customer, it should be noted that 13 different sales experts cited these. This list is not exhaustive, even if there is a clear tendency towards the factors or characteristics mentioned. This is even though experts from seven different sectors have already been surveyed. Further factors and characteristics could be identified if the expert survey were expanded to include the number of respondents within an industry and other sectors.

While the seven characteristics mentioned by at least three experts - 'privacy,' 'likeability,' 'credibility,' 'nose factor,' 'appreciation,' 'authenticity' and 'liability' - can be universally explained by experts and readers, the characteristic 'trust' is far more complex. The word 'trust' is multi-layered, touching many facets of human thought, feeling and action. The analysis and understanding of trust are critical in many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, ethics, and economics. This was also evident in the individual interviews, where the word 'trust' was often mentioned, but no concrete explanation was given. Instead, the other characteristics were mentioned to describe trust building, sometimes equated with relationship building.

The expert interviews and the online survey showed that relationship building is vital in sales. This also confirms the prevailing opinion in the literature presented. While the experts state that relationship building is essential to them both at work and in their private lives as customers, salespeople often believe that salespeople build relationships but do not. The online survey results on building interpersonal relationships show that participants in the sales professional group almost exclusively stated that they usually build relationships with their customers. Nevertheless, most of the participants said that they build relationships individually. This result underlines the trend above that many companies do not offer their employees any guidelines or training on relationship building and, therefore, do not teach them the specific 'how.'

5.2. Recommendations for Science

- The surveys showed that the "trust" factor, in particular, is complex and was not clearly explained. Future research could address the topic of relationship building in sales and examine the various levels of the term 'trust.' On this basis, a deeper understanding of which facets of the characteristic 'trust' contribute to relationship building can be developed. It would also be interesting to see afterward whether the respondents still associate 'trust' with relationship building when asked again.
- An increase in the number of participants in the same survey could also provide further insights and reveal more factors than the previous ones.
- If further participants from other sales companies from various sectors were surveyed again, the results regarding guidelines and sales training could also change. It cannot be ruled out that some companies provide their employees with a guide in which relationship building is specifically described or explained. There may also be sales companies that offer regular training on relationship building.
- It would be an exciting research approach if one or more sales companies were to work intensively with Barthelt's model over a certain period, and the results achieved would be compared with companies that neither train nor promote relationship building in sales practice. This would show the impact of actively promoting interpersonal relationship building on sales success.

5.3. Recommendations for Practice

1. Based on the findings of research into the importance of relationship building for a company's long-term success, it is recommended that more training and so-called guidelines are offered on this topic. It is believed that companies that invest in relationship building will increase their competitiveness and improve customer satisfaction, even in advancing digitalization.
2. Concerning the so-called sales guidelines, it should be noted that relationship building is part of the overall sales process between customer and salesperson. It is, therefore, embedded in the overall process. The expert interviews have shown that some companies have already established such guidelines. Only relationship building as part of the sales process is included, with one exception. These companies should revise their sales guidelines and implement relationship-building.
3. Companies that have not yet established a sales guideline, on the other hand, should consider introducing one. Even beyond relationship building, providing every salesperson with a common thread to guide them in their day-to-day sales activities is essential. Given the increasing shortage of skilled workers, companies will be forced to hire more career changers. Career changers must be given guidance on how to manage their day-to-day sales activities. Experience shows that induction processes are short-lived, meaning that employees, especially those without previous experience, are not sufficiently prepared to look after essential customers of the company directly. However, even sales staff working for decades may not have focused on building customer relationships until now or may have only done so unconsciously. Experience has shown that this change in working methods requires the kind of support a guide would provide.
4. The same applies to sales training. Sales training must be offered to new employees, with or without previous experience, and experienced sales staff so that relationship building is practiced in everyday sales. It is not enough for the topic to be trained as part of the induction process without refresher courses. Particularly during the induction phase, employees experience a wealth of new topics, which means that a topic as fundamentally crucial as relationship building is sometimes quickly forgotten. In addition, the trained content is also exemplified and remembered by the respective managers in day-to-day sales. Experience shows that topics taught in a protected space are often not applied in practice.
5. The experts also stated that it is a management issue to establish topics such as relationship building in everyday sales activities. Managers can also use a corresponding guide as an aid for this.

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this work was to develop a model to improve the sales activities of companies, which enables salespeople to establish interpersonal relationships with customers.

In addition to developing the model, the aim was to identify factors that characterize the development of interpersonal relationships. Although the literature states that sales have evolved into relationship selling and that relationship building is a decisive factor for success in sales, the literature does not mention what characterizes interpersonal relationship building and how a salesperson actually builds a relationship with their customer.

The research conducted also revealed that many companies do not promote relationship-building. They neither provide sales staff with detailed guidelines on relationship building nor are they explicitly trained in this area. Instead, companies leave it up to the sales staff to decide whether and how they want to build relationships. This means the relationship is currently irrelevant in many sales companies and is not anchored in the strategic orientation.

Barthelt's model presented here was developed based on the results of this study and offered precise support and recommendations for action. Specifically, it is a four-phase relationship-building model that represents a cycle and is embedded in the sales process. With the help of Barthelt's model, salespeople receive precise instructions they can implement in practice. With this, they can bring about the factors that, according to research results, characterize interpersonal relationship building.

This assistance or recommendation for action is not addressed solely to the individual salesperson. Sales companies can use Barthelt's model to train interpersonal relationship building. It also serves as a tool for managers in every day sales to implement relationship-building in sales practice.

In conclusion, it can be said that Barthelt's model closes the research gap that has been identified about the 'how' of interpersonal relationship building.

Acknowledgments

The article was written as the partial output of the Interreg project CE0100090 GREENPACT – “Futurepreneurs and SMEs for a sustainable Central Europe | Certification Scheme (50%) and Interreg project CE0200602 “Circular design and development of Sustainable products in 4 key sectors in Central Europe” (50%).

Declaration of Interest statement

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this paper.

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