

PKM: A pendulum for consultative-relational selling

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ABSTRACT

Marketing and knowledge management convergence is a key trend of 21st century competitive business environment, in which, key account managers play an important strategic organisational role due to their blended expertise: technical (organisational and personal knowledge) and relational (trust and ethical behaviour). Although it remains a mystery how their personal knowledge is a key assumption for achieving long term results with customers, namely in consultative-relational selling. This manuscript aims to explore the importance of personal knowledge management in consultative-relational selling (pendulum), and to promote a plausible justification the authors will shed some light over Aureliano Pinheiro MPhil research project (consultative-relational selling influence over customer loyalty in Portuguese luxury hotels and resorts). Thus, the paper recognizes seven sections: research project (aims and objectives, as well as, framing the discussion); case study (an overview, role of theory and role of researcher); customer loyalty (concept and the bond to selling); consultative sale (concept, technical issues and relational issues); relational selling (concept, trust and ethical behaviour); personal knowledge management; pendulum; a metaphorical discussion (the pendulum metaphor and empirical evidences).

KEYWORDS

Personal knowledge management (PKM), pendulum, consultative-relational selling, trust, ethical behaviour and empirical evidences

INTRODUCTION

Business environment in the 21st century engages unforeseen and novel challenges about selling. Piercy (2006) suggests that strategic sales resume this shifting paradigm, due to marketing and knowledge management convergence (e.g. Kenyon & Briggs, 2000). Since, customers are more demanding and informed (McDonald, Rogers & Woodburn, 2000), the selling process is moving from technical to a more relational approach. Likewise, Vargo & Lush (2004) denote that in today's business-to-business interactions the tendency is for selling services solutions (product, assistance and status monitoring), in which Key Account Managers (KAMs) play a vital role.

KAMs represent a blend between technical and relational consultants (Ashridge Consulting, 2003). In spite of this argument, it is essential to explore consultative and relational selling:

1. consultative selling resumes an information exchange among the salesperson and the potential customer. This communicational process aims to explain the solution benefits based on a technical explanation (Organisational Knowledge Management- OKM) (International Training and Development, 2011);
2. and, relational selling reveals the salesperson's behaviour (ethical and social values) during customer interactions (Caldarola, 2009).

Concluding, this manuscript aspires to understand if Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) may act as a pendulum in consultative-relational selling. Therefore the authors will underline the first co-author MPhil research, which explores the relationship among consultative-relational selling influence over customer loyalty in Portuguese luxury hotels and resorts, due to his professional experience. For that, the paper identifies seven components: research project (aims and objectives, as well as, framing the discussion); case study (an overview, role of theory and role of researcher); customer loyalty (concept and the bond to selling); consultative sale (concept, technical issues and relational issues); relational selling (concept, trust and ethical behaviour); personal knowledge management; pendulum; a metaphorical discussion (the pendulum metaphor and empirical evidences).

RESEARCH PROJECT

Aims and objectives

The first co-author research project aspires to acknowledge the importance of consultative-relational selling over customers' loyalty in Portuguese luxury hotels and resorts within organisation X. As a result, the following aims and objectives arise:

- discuss customers loyalty and its dimensions;
- understand consultative and relational selling concepts and their dimensions, as well as, consultative-relational selling;
- and, to comprehend the existing relationship among customers loyalty and consultative-relational selling.

Framing the discussion

The overall research query that guides the first author MPhil research project is: how consultative-relational selling influences the degree of customer loyalty in Portuguese luxury hotels and resorts. However, this manuscript will explore the pendulum importance of PKM throughout consultative-relational selling. Hence, it is possible to believe that such research resumes an exploratory study based on a qualitative assumption through interpretive lens. Even so, in order to avoid potential criticism the authors will detail this option.

Qualitative research focuses on social and cultural phenomena (Gilbert, 2001), and for that, the researchers deal with a small number of cases and numerous variables. Besides, the researcher's impressions and reactions are often important data sources (Myers, 2009) (for further details see case study section), since its data collection involves the researcher, as well as, the participants in a organic way (Bryman & Bell, 2007) and induces several angles of analysis (Creswell, 2003).

Interpretivism resumes a socially constructed reality through consciousness and shared meanings, which influences and is influenced by the context (Myers, 2004), and the outcome of an interpretive investigation is to understand an event rather than figures and percentages (Walsham, 1993).

Following Yin (1994), if a research focuses on “what” questions it may involve an exploratory study; if acknowledges “how” or “why” queries typically engages an explanatory research; and, it is descriptive when uses background information and accurate description. Although Yin’s boundaries are blurry and maybe criticized, as for instance Norman Blaikie (2003) argues. So, exploratory studies occur when there is little or no prior knowledge of a phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

CASE STUDY

An overview

Company X is a multi-level partner for service providers, industries and governments worldwide regarding communications technology (mobile, fixed and IP technologies and services), in order to generate value for potential customers since these technologies are the “steam” of information and knowledge society (Tuomi, 2001). In Portugal, the company operates since 30s as a result of a merger between two companies that produced communications technology, and in the 50s also started to produce semiconductors and other electronic components. Later, in the late 90s it became the major partner for Internet service providers due to its research labs. Today, its portfolio also includes high speed network components, contact center solutions and multimedia applications to cable and digital TV operators.

Role of theory

This exploratory perception intends to develop a theoretical framework that will explain the role of personal knowledge regarding customers’ loyalty in consultative-relational selling, which figure 1 depicts.

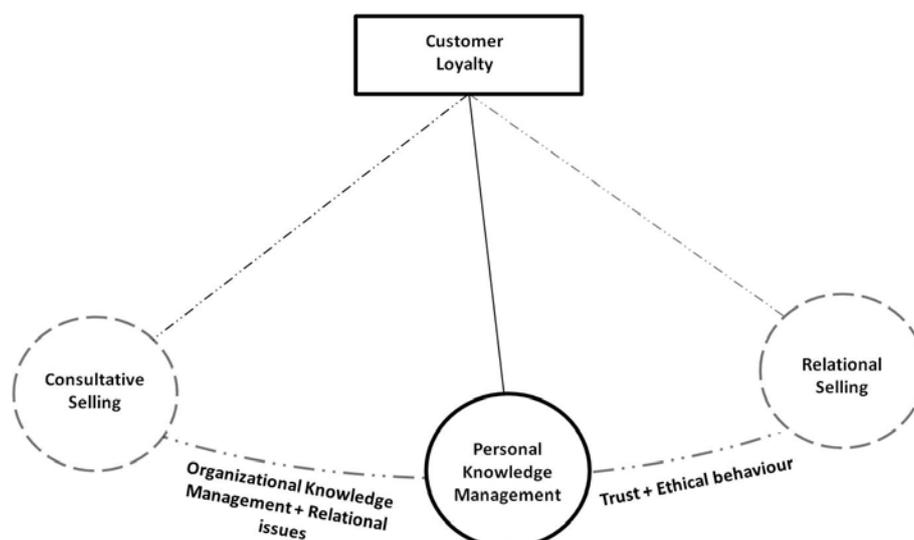


Figure 1. Role of theory (Source: Authors)

Role of researcher

The researcher, first co-author, is a KAM in company X; yet, it is crucial to underline the concept and its analytical dimensions, as well as, to detail Aureliano Pinheiro organisational role and responsibilities.

The origin of KAM is profoundly related to retain and enhance particular relations with some key customers, since these have different impacts into the overall organisational profit (Pardo & Henneberg, 2005), which is consistent with the definition of Cheverton (2004, pp. 9): “key account management is about managing that investment, it is about managing a very different kind of relationship with the customer and, as importantly, managing the implications of that relationship on the supplier’s own business”. Moreover, literature about KAM has been focusing on how incremental value is generated (Workman, Homburg & Jensen, 2003) through a marketing and sales perspective. According to Pardo *et al.* (2006), the marketing perspective refers to customer-orientation within the business trade process, and the sales assumption acknowledges the efficiency of the relational process.

For company X, KAM responsibilities involves creating credibility, building strong and lasting client relationships in order to upmost customer loyalty. For that, the researcher must anticipate customers’ (luxury hotels and resorts) needs concerning VOIP communications infrastructure, LANs, high speed Internet connection, Enterprise Multimedia Solutions (IPTV, VoD, Digital Signage, Games), etc. throughout a close collaboration with certified partners and remaining KAMs, because the organisational structure engages an indirect sales model.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Customer loyalty

Concept

Literature concerning customer loyalty is vast and rich, although the authors illustrate the following definitions:

- “deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a referred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour” (Oliver, 1999, pp. 34);
- is bounded to the salesperson (in contrast to the company) because its personal loyalty contributes to service business loyalty (Bove & Johnson, 2006);
- “customer loyalty is all about attracting the right customer, getting them to buy, buy often, buy in higher quantities and bring you even more customers. However, that focus is not how you build customer loyalty” (Customer Loyalty Institute, 2011).

The bond to selling

Loyalty derives from developing trust over time as a way to create a demand in the mind of the customer, as for instance the empirical work of Foster & Cadogan (2000) demonstrates. If the Reader bears in mind the various concepts of customer loyalty, KAM intangible knowledge (PKM), behaviour and attitudes directly affect the

company sales growth (pressure to selling) and effectiveness since customers are usually loyal to him (Palmatier, Scheer & Steenkamp, 2007).

Consultative selling

Concept

According to Chandler (2011) is “a process involving the sale of a product or service that fills a need not commonly recognized by the prospect, or perceived as addressing an immediate problem, thus often requiring educational counsel to advance towards a sales objective.” Or, “salespeople are more able to develop and maintain long-term relationships with clients (...) when organisations need to ensure that they provide their salespeople with the vital support systems and training that enable them to make the most of their knowledge and skills” (Farrington, 2009). Therefore, educational counselling engages to portray technical (related OKM) and relational issues.

Technical issues

Schermerhorn (2001, pp. 66) declare that

“knowledge management (KM) is used to describe the processes through which organisations develop, organise, and share knowledge to achieve competitive advantage. The significance of knowledge management as a strategic and integrating force in organisations is represented by the emergence of a new executive job title- Chief Knowledge Officer, or CKO.”

Or, OKM involves original roles and responsibilities, organisational policies, and supervising a new workplace culture accomplished by implementing the following strategies: communities of practices, knowledge repositories, expertise directories and best practice replication (Carroll *et al.*, 2001). As a consequence KM merges an organisational and personal perspective, because it refers to “ways of developing and managing social capital” (Jashapara, 2004, pp. 310). In consultative selling underlines the need of an extreme strong knowledge concerning the products by the salesperson, which is supported by the back-office when necessary throughout the sales process and afterwards (Lunsford & Marone, 2004).

Relational issues

A relational selling approach is based on the provider and customer interdependence, a trade-off of significant information, trust among partners and a steady relationship, which permits each party to benefit from a just return on its investments (Slater & Olson, 2000). In spite of this contribution is crucial to illustrate the different strategies of relational selling:

- Customer oriented selling (COS)- embraces building long-lasting encouraging relationships among the supplier and customer (Martin & Bush, 2003). Thomas, Sutar & Ryan (2001) also evaluate the next features of COS: (i) an aspiration to aid customers make adequate purchase choices; (ii) helping customers appraise their needs; (iii) recommending products that will satisfy

customers' requirements; (iv) describing products (and services) effectively; (v) avoiding eloquent or manipulative tactics; and (vi) keeping away pressure as regards to selling;

- Adaptive selling (AS)- shifting sales behaviours throughout a customer interface or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the environment of the selling circumstances (Eveleth & Morris, 2002). Then when KAMs utilise over and over similar presentations with a customer display a low level of adaptability; and in contrast, diverse presentation styles and forms of communication imply high adaptability (Román & Iacobucci, 2010).

Relational selling

Concept

Relational selling emphasizes KAM ability to generate with customers long term trustful relationships, as well as, to promote a cooperative and open communication through and ethical behaviour (Avila, Inks & Avila, 2006). Or, Jolson (1997) is "the building of mutual trust within the buyer/seller dyad [to] create long term relationship, alliances and collaborative arrangements with selected customers" (p. 76).

Trust

When seen as a characteristic or property of individuals, trust is a personality variable, thereby emphasizing individual characteristics like feelings, emotions, and values, leading to his behavioural actions (Misztal, 1996). Or, as Cohen & Prusak (2001, pp. 29) state "it is like the air we breathe (...), and the feeling of trust enables individuals to do things on their own". Moreover, for Möllering, Bachman & Lee (2004, pp. 556) "agents only become aware of trust when it is problematic". This clearly characterizes the implicit nature of trust, since indicates a willingness to be vulnerable to another party either as a consequence of a belief in a partners' good intent, belief in their competence and capability, belief in their reliability, or belief in their perceived openness (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Many people relate trust to their expectation concerning others' moral behaviour, leading to a potential positive, as well as, negative dynamics throughout the process. According to Etzioni (1998), being trustful can constitute that leap of faith which leads to another important conclusion: if others consider you as a trusting person, there is strong evidence that they will tend to repay your trust (symmetric outcome of human behaviour). Trustworthiness are the features that an individual recognizes in another or group that elicits a belief that trust can, or cannot, be placed taking into account personal risk and weaknesses (Brien, 1998). According to Flores & Solomon (1998), trustworthiness is a virtue that rules the intensity of trust and which, at a minimal level, may evoke distrust.

Ethical behaviour

Ethical decision making is a complex process namely in organisational contexts (Kelley & Elm, 2003). Yet, the existing empirical studies use as praxis the work of Jones (1991) regarding moral reasoning, which embraces a combination of moral

intensity (MI), and moral sensibility (MS). MI refers to “the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation through six constructs” (Jones, 1991, pp. 372): magnitude of consequences (sum of positive or negative circumstances resulting from the moral act); social consensus (degree of social agreement as regards to the ethical validity of an action); probability of effect (probability of the action and circumstance); temporal immediacy (length of time between the action and its consequences); proximity (social, cultural, psychological, or physical closeness of the moral agent regarding other individuals); concentration of effect (impact versus the number of individuals affected). MS is the individual cognitive process (Jones, 1991), which is highly influenced by the work of cognitive development of Piaget (1965) that Kohlberg & Kramer (1969) applied to moral psychology. Even so, more recently some authors like Panã (2006) have discussed the importance of moral intelligence (operational interaction among three levels of moral conduct- action, cognition, spirituality).

PKM

PKM is not a novel idea; nevertheless, it aims to indicate how individuals manage their personal knowledge (tacit knowledge and acquired experiences). In contrast to broad knowledge management this perception is more appropriated to explain individual motivations and behaviour, as several researchers and practitioners demonstrate (Sinclair, 2008). Following Jefferson (2006) some of the leading authors that have been recognizing this concept are:

- David DeLong- Massachusetts Institute of Technology, AgeLab and Babson College (lecturer);
- David Gurteen- Gurteen Knowledge (consultant);
- Jason Frand & Carol Hixon- Anderson School of Management, UCLA (lecturers);
- Karl-Erik Sveiby- Swedish Business School of Hanken, Helsinki (lecturer);
- Nonaka Ikujiro & Takeuchi Hirotaka- Hitotsubashi University (lecturers).
- Paul Dorsey- Dulcan Inc (consultant);
- Steve Barth- Global Insight (consultant) and editor of *KM Magazine*;
- Thomas H. Davenport & Laurence Prusak- Babson College (lecturers);
- Timothy Lethbridge- University of Ottawa (lecturer);

PKM has already been used in Polanyi (1958), and emerges also in the work of Frand & Hixon (1999), or Mitchell (2005); nonetheless, what is PKM? Higgison (2005) defines it as managing and supporting personal knowledge and information so that it is available, significant and valuable to the individual; maintaining networks, contacts and communities; making life easier and more enjoyable; and exploiting personal capital. Therefore, it can be related to the topic of personal information management, namely to the work of Jones & Bruce (2005) concerning personal space of information. This concept implies all informational items that are, at least nominally, under that person’s control (but not necessarily exclusively so), being an example weblogs (Efimova, 2005). In conclusion Personal Information Management (PIM) focuses on managing all the information around an individual, and PKM with embrained, embodied and encoded knowledge, i.e. only tacit knowledge.

Pendulum: A metaphorical discussion

The pendulum metaphor

A metaphor is a word, phrase or symbol that typically designates a dissimilar meaning, or is an implicit comparison (The Free Dictionary, 2011). Despite the bond to literature, the exploitation of metaphors for scientific purposes is well quite common. In this case, PKM is an oscillating and restoring force that will allow the equilibrium (pendulum characteristics) (Wikipedia, 2011) among consultative and relational selling.

Empirical evidences

The best way to illustrate KAMs ability to overcome a challenging business environment, namely in ICT, is to introduce some real examples (Cheverton, 2004). As a result, the authors will portray three keen empirical evidences from Aureliano Pinheiro working experiences.

- Case 1: developing a potential business opportunity with a non-knowledgeable customer about ICT

Organisational procedures sometimes require the involvement of a Junior Account manager (JAM) or a certified partner, both supervised by the KAM (when such account is considered strategic by Company X). For this kind of selling the procedures must be consultative, although communication ought to be assertive and simple (emphasizing customers needs) in order to obtain a successful and quick business decision. This example started throughout a phone call in which the first co-author identified himself and inquired the potential customer: "Please let me know how I can help you?"

After the official procedures, namely to understand the customer's needs, extra information is exchanged through multiple interactions. These multiple interactions allow evolving throughout the process due to a positive and mutual understanding, since this potential customer had very positive references of the KAM (other customer's feedback). In the end, Aureliano outlined and detailed the business proposal due to customer non-existent skills concerning ICT in order to assure a trustful relationship, as well as, an immediate validation.

In spite of this procedure a written proposal was sent acknowledging objectives, issues, benefits and main legal issues for the customer! After some minutes it was has received the order for this business. Furthermore, a long term relationship was developed with Aureliano since later on more proposals were approved for other companies (owned by the customer), or references gave by this customer. An interesting information was that the first business interaction has taken 10 minutes, and the others less than 7 minutes (trustful relationship consequence).

- Case 2: developing a business opportunity due to a government contract

This example is probably the less influenced by a consultative-relational business approach, since government contracts are well defined concerning legal issues. Although, understanding customer needs and requirements will allow the company to

recognize their importance and impact over government decision making, since their impact is not fully described into the public contract requirement.

KAM has endorsed and won a proposal for a major government contract by assuming the legal requirements, but also due to pre-prepared document that would reflect how the remaining stakeholders would engage with the Government, namely regarding hardware, applications and services. This scenario was only possible due to the global operation that Company X engages, since a traditional consultative-relational approach would not be effective due to time, informational and legal constraints.

- Case 3: developing a business opportunity for a future important customer

One of the most important Requests for Proposals (RFPs) was to build and generate real value for an international project in Portugal developed a few years ago. This project intention was to enable the entire ICT infrastructure for a luxury hotel managed by a major international player (until that moment was not a customer for Company X). Thus, the project involved practitioners from a broad range of knowledge bodies, as for instance Engineering, Architecture, Communicational Engineering, among others, that were well recognized in Portugal and abroad! From the previous information's is possible to consider that was a project with high levels of pressure.

The process began with a pre-project meeting in order to validate the customer assumptions regarding business negotiation, financial possibilities, and above all to recognize the ability to meet customers' needs regarding the technological infrastructure. At the end and after several analyses to the meeting results a set of prime actions were developed, namely a memo for understanding the multiple actions (tasks, dates, level of responsibility, place, resources, etc) for each multidisciplinary team. In addition, it was necessary to readapt the organisation template for RFP in order to readapt the existing organisational model due to multiple phases, as well as, the array of technologies.

A week later KAM and his team had the RFP completed, detailed and validated throughout several meetings, as a way to align customers needs and the multidisciplinary teams that addressed the following areas of expertise: cabling (copper versus optical fiber); security (hardware and software); voice (wired and wireless); data (wired and wireless); applications (management, configuration, evolution etc). From these meetings it was concluded that the technological infrastructure engaged various interesting trade-offs, namely in copper versus optical fiber:

- copper was very interesting concerning price, although did not fulfil some key areas, as for instance: distances among sites (some of them were more than 18 Km);
- regarding energy consumption and maintenance costs, copper endorsed also higher costs;
- with reference to liability, optical fiber (that is a passive technology), resumed extremely low costs of maintenance and higher range of broadband.

After a serious and difficult process it was possible to set an agenda between the customer and the wide range of providers. Despite this positive achievement, it was KAM personal skills (persistence and involvement) and knowledge (contacts network) that had a major influence over this decision. The final step, to monitor the

entire workflow process with the customer was quite easy due to KAM consultative-relational selling process, which permitted a close relationship based on trust and effective business and institutional partnership. This serious engagement for a long trustful collaboration was a fundamental issue to generate a successful business, as well as, today the customer and Company X have developed their trustful and loyal relationship. Beyond this keen evidence, is also possible to acknowledge that other customers from Company X have effective and permanent business relationships with this resort!

CONCLUSION

In spite of the nature of this contribution, ongoing MPhil research project, it is reasonable to recognize numerous interesting findings:

1. Customers loyalty to the company is dependable on KAMs;
2. Consultative selling is not purely technical due to the influence of KAMs behaviour;
3. Relational selling is a “manifesto” for KAMs ethical behaviour, although it will be impossible to have long term relationships;
4. KAMs play a decisive role in organisational success, in spite of OKM support;
5. PKM is the equilibrium force for achieving success among consultative and relational selling.

The research design and framework seem to retort positively the research aims despite data collection methods and analysis require additional explanations. Concluding, comments about these topics will be welcome during the paper presentation in MSKE 2011.

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