

DIRECTIONS IN SALES RESEARCH FOCUS

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Abstract. The authors who have published descriptions of research in the field of sales may be proud of the significant results they achieved. However, according to numerous references, such output is not faultless. The insufficient communication between academics and practitioners, implementation issues with the solutions provided, or improper allocation of academic resources bring about the necessity to analyse the output concerning this question.

For this purpose research on references was carried out, which indicated divergences between what is essential for the practitioners and what the academics find to be the most urgent issues. This paper indicates such divergences, i.e. exaggerated analysis of sales techniques with simultaneous insufficiency of research on forecasting and budgeting. The thesis set here states that the academic sales research directions temporarily used are far from the ones desired and corresponding to the needs of the market, understood here as the entrepreneur's environment. Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to indicate the desired directions of sales research in the organization, currently expected both by the world of business and of science.

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Raktžodžiai: pardavimai, pardavimų tyrimai, pardavimų vadyba.

1. Introduction

The environment that contemporary business operates in not only seems to be very dynamic, but also difficult to define, with some components that are hard to explain. In effect, the familiar measuring, forecasting or, finally, management methods are difficult to apply under such conditions. This is reported by the authors of numerous publications, whether based on their own findings or the results of extensive research projects. The discussion on this subject seems to continue since the early 1980's,¹ and

¹ Naisbitt, J. *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*, Grand Central Publishing:1988;

it expands rather than vanishes.² In the opinion of the said authors, the environment of the organization's functioning is redefined daily and the entities must continuously adapt their businesses to the new conditions. This is the case both on the operation and strategic level. It is more and more frequently indicated that the strategic, tactic or operating targets should consider the dynamics and the directions of changes of the micro and macro-environment, such as international competition, globalization, emerging of the global market or drop of economic growth of numerous countries, unexpected by the significant group of analysts in the recent years.

The organizations however, or rather the people that form them, seem to handle the situation in at least a few different ways.

- The first is the use of one's own experiences (knowledge management, data and database management, competing on analytics, etc.).
- The second is the experience of other entities (benchmarking, best practices, cooperation etc.).
- The third is based on aggregated knowledge originating from the world of science (clusters and metaclusters, combining science and business, supply model of innovation, innovations pushed by science, etc.).

All the above methods are assumed to lead to the escalation of the synergy effect and become fertilizer for new, lucrative innovations. The directions comprise each area of organization functioning, also specified by the functional criterion.

Therefore, the author's interest was directed towards the area related to sales and in this context the sales research directions in the organization, desired or perhaps insufficiently developed, will be discussed herein.

The thesis set here is that the directions of academic sales research contemporarily used is far from those desired and corresponding to the market demands, understood as business environment.

The target is to indicate the direction in sales research in the organization, currently expected both by the world of business and science, which, in the case of management sciences, seem to be difficult to differentiate. Particular attention is drawn here to the comparison between business and sales functioning conditions, characteristic for highly developed economies and developing Central and Eastern Europe countries, new EU member states.

The research nature comprises of reference studies and represents the overview of the existing publications and conclusions formulated by the authors. It includes publications directed straight to business and academic ones, published on such platforms as: *Global Sales Science Institute*³ or in periodicals, e.g. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*,⁴ *Selling Power* and others.

Toffler A., *Future Shock*. Bantam: 1984, etc.

² Hamel, G. *What Matters Now: How to Win in a World of Relentless Change, Ferocious Competition and Unstoppable Innovation*. Jossey-Bass: 2012.

³ <<http://salesscience.org/>>.

⁴ <<http://www.jpssm.org/>>.

The overview will tend to present the stratification of the actual research directions and expectations of the desired direction. The whole paper will concern the area of sales understood as the organization's function (by its functional division)⁵.

2. Level of knowledge in sales research

Following the output of publications in the scope of widely understood sales, we may get the impression that distinctly changes both in reference to the defined research object, the method it is examined in and the direction or target set to such research. First of all, there is a significant stratification understood by the researchers of the notion of sales from the very act of transaction⁶ to commerce close to economy and comprising global economy.⁷ One may get the impression that unclear elements occur already on the foundations of the basic assumption as well as issues arising in further development of this trend. After all, how can we compare or base on research, if their basic assumption or set of objects definition significantly diverge from each other? One may guess that, for example, when defining sales as a process taking place inside (and perhaps partly outside) the organization, the research on such exchange objects may significantly differ from the same research on the same object, however with assumed definition of sales as a transaction, for example. Thus, an issue arises of various frameworks of research and frameworks an object is enclosed in. With the contextual nature of management sciences, this may be of crucial importance.

The changes in the scope of research objects are reported by the authors of Chally, the scientific nature whereof may rise certain objections. However, it is acknowledged as an important reference by a large number of periodicals considering the sales topic. The authors of said report say that perception of exchange of goods or rather goods sales as the most important aspect is not up-to-date any more. Since 2006 the growth of service sales significance has been noticed, with a simultaneous drop of importance of selling products, understood as physical existences. At the same time the transformation of commercial cooperation⁸ of business partners from goods sales oriented sector to service sales oriented one is noticeable. As they further report, based on the obtained results, the sales evolution on the B2B market would choose one of these ways.

⁵ Bieniok, H.; Rokita J. *Struktura organizacyjna przedsiębiorstwa*,. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe: Warszawa, 1984.

⁶ Przybyłowski, K.; Hartley, S.W.; Kerin, R.A.; Rudelius, W. *Marketing*. Issue I, ABC, 1998, pp. 10.

⁷ Sheppard, E. "Trade, globalization and uneven development: Entanglements of geographical political economy." *Progress in Human Geography*, Feb 2012, Vol. 36 Issue 1, pp.44-71.

⁸ The term "commerce" has been used with premeditation here, being fully aware that its meaning differs from the notion of distribution, transaction or sales and, most of all, comprises the set of relations and interactions of transaction nature, aggregated and perceived in a macro scale. The idea of macro scale here is the total of all the transactions taking place on the overall market. Similarly, the terms of distribution, sales and transaction appear herein further understood as non-identical terms. Their entry and use is a conscious procedure aimed at highlighting the specific terms differing by the type of designates.

The first way assumes the use of new technologies in sales, which reduces the traditional aspects related to distribution, to such an extent even that it will eliminate direct seller-buyer contact.⁹ At this point the changes occurring within an organization and thinking about sales may be defined as follows:

- the growth of emphasis on cost analyses and the search for beneficial relationships of measure-building efficiency indexes,
- the growth of emphasis on creation, expansion and use of customer databases with the use of frequently complicated mathematical-statistical instrumentation,
- the growth of emphasis on research and analyses enabling the collection of such market and customer data that are important for sales relation development and the growth of value of purchases,
- the development of distribution channels generating low operation costs,
- the change in thinking and methods of building network relationships with the customer and product/service marketing.

This refers to the wide trend of research on e-commerce with the Internet channel as a leading aspect. The Internet bias is visible here and it seems to establish a specific field of sales research. The field is sometimes hard to distinguish between logistics/distribution and sales themselves. Sales as a separate field of research may strongly need to establish easy-to-discover-borders between marketing, logistics and sales.

The second possibility is an evolution tending to focus on the key accounts of a specific organization and significant changes in:

- the growth of customer service quality level perceived subjectively,
- the growth of frequency and quality of contact with the customer and creating relationships with them,
- the perception of transaction and product or service as one of the elements of building relationships with the customer,

The findings are supported by Sheth and Sharma, writing that a contemporary organization selects key accounts out of the portfolio of the customers served—in other words, those who are responsible for high turnover within the entity revenue structure. It provides the particularly committed accounts comprehensive sales of goods, frequently together with expanded accompanying pre- and post-sale services. The authors also indicate that significant resources are engaged in the creation of a long-term relationship between the customers and the offerer.¹⁰ The costs of the very production and services often become a less important issue and occupy a relatively less significant position in the total structure of customer service costs. They present the shift in the diagram (fig.1), which seems to reflect well the conclusions drawn by the authors.

⁹ Chally Report (2007), Chally World Class Sales Excellence Research Report. HR Chally Group, Dayton, OH.; <www.chally.com/benchmark>.

¹⁰ Sheth, J. and Sharma, A. *The impact of the product to service shift in industrial markets and the evolution of the sales organization*. Industrial Marketing Management, vol. 37, 2008, pp.260-269.

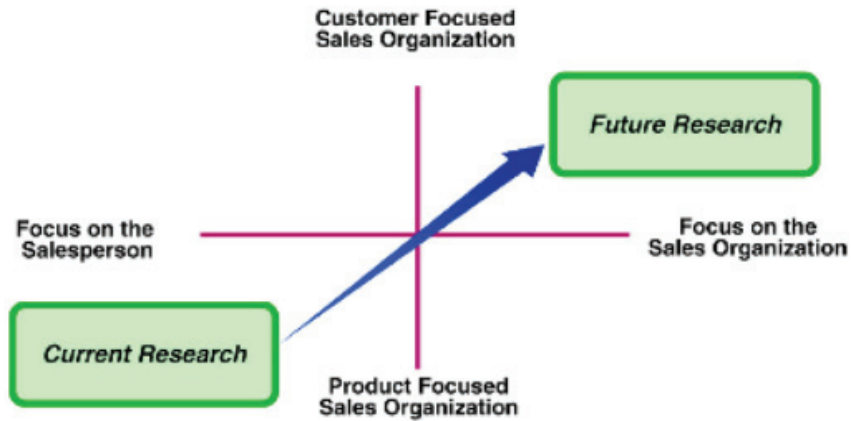


Fig. 1. Changes in thinking about sales and their impact on sales research development directions.

Source: Sheth, J. and Sharma, A. (2008). "The impact of the product to service shift in industrial markets, and the evolution of the sales organization." *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 37, pp. 260.

They also note that the market changes and is more focused on intangible resources, co-creation of values and management of buyer–seller relationships. They indicate that most of the academic papers on sales are focused on such issues as: motivation and motivating, compensation (as a notion occurring mainly in American publications) or the recruitment process. Much less attention, however, is paid to the dynamics of environment changes and its impact on the practical aspects of sales and sales management. Thus, the interest is concentrated on the organization inside and endogenic factors, while the exogenic factors are somewhat ignored in the context of sales.

Therefore, we may get the impression that sales have become an operational aspect of organization functioning in the eyes of the researchers that its scope closely correlated with the functional element may only be significant. Although both the term and principles of creating the sales strategy are known, the research characteristic for strategy subject matter does not follow. Despite the fact that it is a strategy on the tactic or even operating level and this level of thinking about strategy is even permitted by the experts in the subject,¹¹ nevertheless, the research is focused on aspects characteristic for typically operating actions.

Therefore, sales automation may become one of the most significant future strategic goals for organizations and this is the issue researchers should focus on. Replacing personal selling by on-line sales or at least expanding distribution by electronic sales are the objects of various analyses both in scientific and business publications or even general knowledge periodicals. Similar situation occurs with focus on the customer and creation and co-creation of values. The interesting thing, however, is that we can

¹¹ Rokita, J. *Zarządzanie strategiczne. Tworzenie i utrzymywanie przewagi konkurencyjnej*. PWE, Warszawa 2005, pp.36

find numerous publications on the technical aspect of online services, but the strategic aspect of the change is almost absent in the research. Anyhow, such changes do not follow the increased interest and development of research in this scope. The world of science carries out such research, however neither its depth nor number fully cover the demand the world of business calls.

3. Redefinition of the term “sales”

The on-going changes taking place in the widely understood market and the varying customer demands lead to the growth of a business process complexity. It influences the redefinition of the notion of sales and the function of sales in the organization. It slowly evolves from the physical transfer of property rights towards a complex process, perhaps even a certain general (or even strategic) description of the organization capability to offer goods and services on the market. In numerous publications sales are understood as a wide scope of customer service and are related to developed pre- and post-sale services. The boundaries fade between sales and marketing, promotion, public relations, logistics, or even production and design. In that way it is created the concept of prosumption including the customers in almost every aspect of creating and selling products and services.¹²

It is also difficult to accept somewhat the statement that sales are marketing tools.¹³ It may well be vice versa. Everything is mutually interwoven and a clear separation of the function within the organization becomes a more and more distinct issue. At the time of multi-channel distribution systems¹⁴ close cooperation of several functional divisions is a necessity. That is however neither simple nor obvious. The conclusion has much further reaching effects, as it requires a change in thinking about the organization structures and its strategy. Clear boundaries do not exist anymore and, for example, description of units and positions by tasks become more and more difficult, while description by responsibilities and targets to be reached by employees becomes more distinct need. This is, however, what is frequently unready for neither the organizations nor the legal systems of states. Moreover, sales presented in such a way bring unclear frameworks of employee actions and practically impede the creation of explicit and long-lasting indications on the performance of sales functions.

The changes clearly take place so dynamically that research development is not always able to keep up with them. Thus, there are situations in which it is worth to notice that managers of organizations are abandoned by supportive researchers who are focused on different topics. Companies see assistance anywhere and have only the choice between elaborate solutions and sophisticated tools significantly outpacing the achievements of the world of science.

¹² Ritzer, G.; Jurgenson N. “Production, Consumption, Prosumption” *Journal of Consumer Culture*; Mar. 2010, Vol. 10, Issue 1, pp.13-36

¹³ Kotler, Ph. *Marketing*. Rebis, Warszawa 2005, pp.145

¹⁴ Kramer, T. “Podstawy marketing” *Państwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne*. Warszawa 1995, pp.128

This is the case, for example, with the very understanding of the term of sales. Until recently the researchers used to encounter all the sales topics to the scope of marketing as one of its tools or as a distribution as a specific branch of logistics. Simultaneously there have been developed in organizations clearly distinguishable divisions of sales, performing different functions from those of marketing or logistics. It is also possible to get the impression that the solutions achieved by the world of science come too late to support substantially the obtainment of competitive advantage on the market or simply when the issue is not up-to-date anymore.¹⁵

While redefining the term “sales” and the functions performed by them, the elements related to ethics cannot be omitted.¹⁶ It may have risen from the assumption that ethics not always accompany effective sales. That statement however seems to be fairly controversial. In fact the ethical activities of companies cannot be separated from the questions related to building trust and, as a final effect, the relationships with the customer. After all, sales tend to follow this direction, or are asked by the environment to follow it. Understanding the role of ethics in everyday actions is crucial for the development of a business based on sales. Organizations seem to have started to appreciate this precious aspect and possibly have become convinced that in the long run ethic conduct would bring measurable benefits.¹⁷

Sales have become a more and more distinct strategic element in the organization's functioning and require the participation of managerial staff in its planning. The growth of their meaning in the organizations is visibly not followed by changes in the increased number of academic publications prepared with the awareness of what the business wants. Study curricula (for example at Polish universities, such as Warsaw School of Economics, Cracow University of Economics, University of Economics in Katowice, University of Economics in Wrocław, etc..) treat the sales area as if it were of less importance. At the same time, the quantitative drop of publications on sales in academic periodicals has been noted.^{18,19}

4. Desired directions of research on sales

One of the directions particularly underdeveloped in terms of publishing and research seems to comprise of issues related to finance in sales. After all, financial results and budgeting are almost everyday practice related to this area of entity functioning. One may even get the impression that organizations and managers are left alone. The world of science behaves as if it were escaping from the topic and prefers further, deeper

¹⁵ Stewart, T.A. “The Top Line.” *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 84 No. 7/8, 2006.

¹⁶ Pindelski, M. Etyka. “CSR i CSV w orientacjach strategicznych.” *Przegląd Organizacji*, nr 2/2012, pp. 6-10.

¹⁷ Wood, G., “Ethics at the sales-purchasing interface: A case of double standards?” *Journal of Marketing Practice: Applied Marketing Science*, Vol. 1 Issue 3, 1995, pp.21–38.

¹⁸ Ghazaleh, M.A.; Haghghi, M. “The effect of selling strategies on sales performance.” *Business Strategy Series*. Vol. 10 Issue 5, 2009, pp.266–282.

¹⁹ Plouffe, C.R.; Williams, B.C. and Wachner, T. “Navigating difficult waters: publishing trends and scholarship in sales research.” *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 28, 2008.

development of research on the aspects that have already been extensively explored. The financial aspects and budgeting are somewhat left beyond the researchers' scope of interest. It forces the managers and entrepreneurs to search for solutions of their own, while the result of the situation seems to be domination over the researchers, still enhanced by the information provided by advisors, practitioners, guidebook authors as well as various types of crooks dealing with sales and related fields.

In this situation, the development of research instrumentation focused on the search for such solutions that could be implemented in business practice in this area, could be justified.

Following this track, S.Geiger i P. Guenzi²⁰ carried out a survey on a representative group of European practitioners dealing with sales. The survey concerns the effect of changes in the environment on sales performance. Out of 18 determinants, as important to contemporary sales environment they indicated

- the growth of customer expectations,
- the growth of fluctuations in the market,
- the growth of pressure on productivity,
- IT advance stage.

as the factors with the highest influence on the change of sales specifics.

However, the question ignored by the authors is the growing importance of the quantitative methods. Along with database development, ontological classifications of various data transformed into quantitative records of the IT tools are more frequently used to refer to statistical analyses or mathematical prediction models. This also takes place in sales where databases about customers and knowledge about processes also become a strategic resource.

According to Collins and Mauritson the sales divisions use quantitative methods for:

- modelling and optimization of processes in order to increase their efficiency,
- carrying out simulations of operating activity,
- demand forecasting.²¹

The growth of interest in the quantitative methods is directly related to the development of new technologies. The market offers more and more complex software items for simulation modelling and optimization of making more and more complex analyses. In this field we may also find numerous publications of a theoretical nature. The gap between the applicative papers and difficult-to-perceive academic considerations seems to be filled by entities offering software to support the functioning of sales units. According R.Y.Darmon,²² or D.Stojanovic,²³ they are the ones who provide direct tools to forecast demand or optimize processes, rather than the researchers.

²⁰ Geiger, S.; Guenzi P, "The sales function in the twenty-first century: where are we and where do we go from here?" *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 43 Issue 7/8, pp.873–889

²¹ Collins, R.H.; Mauritson, R.J. "Microcomputer Applications: Artificial Intelligence in Sales Forecasting Applications." *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*. Vol 7 No 1,1987, pp. 77-80.

²² Darmon, R.Y. "Predicting the Long-Run Profit Impact of a Contemplated Sales Force Compensation Plan." *The Journal of the Operational Research Society*. Vol. 48, No. 12, Dec., 1997, pp. 1215-1218.

²³ Stojanovic, D. "Modeling Sales." *The Journal of the Operational Research Society*. Vol. 45, No. 9, Sept., 1994, pp. 1060-1067.

Academic publications, however, provide vastly extensive studies on other topics, although still related to sales. The research is characterized by a strong focus on evaluation of results, sales processes and techniques, buyers' behaviours and motivating sales personnel. Research in this field is fairly advanced. The areas that are called traditional are characterized with relatively good reflection of the market needs. The information flow between the world of science and business in this scope is evaluated positively.

Nevertheless, based on the conclusions of S. Geiger and P. Guenzi,²⁴ referred to above, the organization needs, in the scope of sales analysis to significantly shift towards budgeting, forecasting and mathematical-statistical support of the recruitment processes. Simultaneously one may acknowledge that the traditional areas have been examined at present to such a large extent that the managers have found them sufficiently recognized and simultaneously reduced their relative importance for the sales functioning.

5. Conclusions

The practitioners dealing with sales indicate two areas in particular, where they need the assistance of the world of science, namely forecasting and budgeting. However, vast insufficiency of knowledge in this scope, particularly academic, is emphasized here. The academics' interest does not seem to tend in such directions, which is proven by the number of publications, which was examined by B.C. Williams and C.R. Plouffe.²⁵ One may guess that the reason for such a situation is the lack of extensive knowledge on quantitative, statistical research and finance. This may be the reason for the fact that they much more willingly choose areas in which they feel more comfortably. However, these aspects are so important for the practitioners that the years to come should induce the researchers to take the challenge and concentrate on the topics.^{26,27}

Areas may be indicated where development is significant thanks to academics. It is reflected in the number of publications. However, the extent of usability of the achievements is, according to the authors, unsatisfactory.²⁸ As an example, we may refer to research carried out on the recruitment process where business practitioners indicate significant difficulties with the implementation of the solutions suggested by the academics. This, in turn, indicates the by far more complex issue of insufficient communication in the scope of research on sales, between the world of science and business.

In case of research on training sales personnel, sales organization, management of actions in time and territorial sales management, although both sides perceive the

²⁴ Geiger, S., Guenzi P. "The sales function in the twenty-first century: where are we and where do we go from here?" *European Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 43 Issue 7/8, pp.873- 889.

²⁵ Williams, B.C., Plouffe C.R. "Assessing the evolution of sales knowledge; a 20 year content analysis." *Industrial Marketing Management*. Vol.36, pp.408-419 .

²⁶ Ramaseshan, B. "Marketing Budgeting Practices of Retailers." *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*. Vol. 2 Issue 1, 1990, pp.40- 45.

²⁷ West, D.C. "Managing Sales Forecasting." *Management Research News*, Vol. 20 Issue 4, 1997, pp.1- 10.

²⁸ Williams, B.C.; Plouffe, C.R, op. cit.

topics as important, in the world of practice an opinion starts to dominate that these topics have been described sufficiently. The evaluation of the publications is high here, in terms of their usability and provision of well-built, useful tools to improve sales functioning.

The same authors (Williams and Plouffe), indicate as the directions of desired research long-term trends that might suggest an optimum way and selection of future topics.²⁹ The external factors and their influence on the functioning of sales units may represent an important element of the market game in the near future and, simultaneously, become the object of potentially interesting studies on the multi-factor formation of the organizational reality.

T. N. Ingram³⁰ indicates the responsibility, cooperation and complexity of processes as potential trends in the development of sales research. In his opinion, the complexity of business processes in sales has an immense potential and the analysis of correlations between them shall enable coming to interesting, perhaps innovative, conclusions. Moreover, he emphasizes the need for research on sales ethics, responsibility and sales relationships, not only with the customer, but also with the market. Relationship management, according to this author, shall be the key to achieve a competitive advantage.

Nevertheless, the key element here seems to be the development of a good cooperation model in designing research between the business and academic circles.

This research represents a reference study and can be the foundation for further, this time explorative, research on the indicated topics related to sales performance in the organization. Thus, both quantitative and qualitative research is recommended as the next step. Its purpose would not only be the indication of the present situation in the scope of detailed divergences between the perception of sales by science and business, but also, perhaps first of all, the development of such solutions that would be applied as useful in the sales practice.

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PARDAVIMŲ TYRIMŲ KRYPTYS

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Santrauka. Pardavimų tyrimų srityje yra pasiekta ženklių rezultatų, tačiau apžvelgus gausius straipsnius šioje srityje, galima pastebėti šiokių tokių klaidų. Visų pirma pastebimas nesikalbėjimas tarp akademikų ir praktikų, siūlant praktinius sprendimus bei juos igyvendinant.

Atlikus mokslinės literatūros šaltinių šioje srityje analizę, nustatyti prioritetų skirtumai tarp praktikų ir akademinės sferos atstovų. Šiame straipsnyje pateikiama šių išsiskyrusių prioritetų analizė. Nustatyta, kad per daug dėmesio yra skiriama pardavimų technikai, o nepakankamai tyrėjų dėmesio yra skirta prognozavimui ir biudžeto formavimui. Nustatyta, kad akademinio sluoksnio atstovų atlikti pardavimų tyrimai prasilenkia su rinkos lūkesčiais. Straipsnio tikslas yra nustatyti reikiamas pardavimų tyrimų organizacijoje kryptis, atsižvelgiant į pasaulinio verslo rinkos poreikius bei mokslo pasiekimus toje srityje.

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