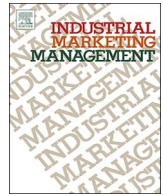




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Rapport building in authentic B2B sales interaction

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ABSTRACT

Acquisition of new customers is critical for any business seeking to achieve growth. This paper investigates the skill of rapport building in establishing new customer relationships and engaging customers for solution co-creation. A qualitative multiple phase study supports a micro-level analysis of rapport building in the context of business-to-business solutions and services selling. The study includes three parts: in-depth qualitative interviews, conversation analysis of video-recorded real-life sales meetings, and follow-up interviews. The results show that salesperson-initiated actions have little influence on rapport building and that strong initial rapport can compensate for potential interaction weaknesses later in the meeting. Our findings point to a set of collaborative actions and related skills needed to build rapport and move a relationship forward. These findings provide theoretical insights into the earliest moments of new customer relationship formation. The results inform businesses seeking to refocus and develop their rapport building skills towards more customer-engaging collaboration.

1. Introduction

Companies must acquire new customers to survive, yet initial customer encounters remain challenging, requiring increasingly deeper engagement. In response, firms are striving to initiate new business relationships built on credibility and trust for possible collaboration (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987) while engaging in relationship marketing efforts to improve their relationships with business customers (e.g., Dwyer et al., 1987; Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Zhang, Watson, Palmatier, & Dant, 2016). Salespeople must approach the initial stages of interaction with long-term customer development goals in mind; then, they have to move the relationship forward from that initial meeting (e.g., Dixon, Spiro, & Jamil, 2001).

Rapport building involves setting a foundation and engaging customers in new business relationships. Researchers define rapport as a harmonious relationship between participants; it involves a mutual connection and understanding or a perceived similarity to one another (Clark, Drew, & Pinch, 2003; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). Rapport building includes the initial activities designed to move towards this connection and harmony. Rapport is a prerequisite of customer loyalty and engagement (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). Meanwhile, the extant literature indicates that selling customized solutions requires a high level of customer engagement and solution co-creation (Rapp, Bachrach, Panagopoulos, & Ogilvie, 2014; Sharma & Iyer, 2011; Töytäri & Rajala,

2015; Ulkuniemi, Araujo, & Tähtinen, 2015).

Rapport relates to the concept of trust: researchers have presented that rapport builds credibility, which leads to trust (Manning, Ahearne, & Reece, 2012). However, the two concepts differ in that rapport reflects a harmonious relationship between participants, while a customer's trust is a belief that the salesperson will serve the customer's long-term interests (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). Therefore, rapport is the starting point for a relationship, while trust comes at a later stage in that relationship. As the foundation for relationships, rapport building is particularly important in sales contexts.

Given its importance, it is surprising that empirical research remains scarce when it comes to rapport building in specific B2B sales interactions (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007; Evans, McFarland, Dietz, & Jaramillo, 2012). Within this domain, one of the most under-researched areas is the initial establishment of relationships (Evans et al., 2012). The few existing studies model the effects of rapport on sales outcomes. They also tend to focus on the B2C context and offer a limited perspective, the seller's side of the dyad (Campbell, Davis, & Skinner, 2006). Rapport building and its related sales practices and skills remain overlooked despite being the foundation of customer relationship development.

The present study addresses this research gap by shedding more light on rapport building techniques and skills in B2B sales interactions. We argue that (1) a more in-depth understanding of rapport building is

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crucial in improving customer engagement; (2) rapport building is a collaborative effort accomplished by the participants, thus requiring analysis of both salesperson and customer actions; and (3) B2B rapport building must be studied in its authentic naturally-occurring sales interaction context using a qualitative approach.

In this paper, we present a multi-phase research project including three parts. Part I explores what salespeople say they do to build rapport in initial sales meetings through interviews and qualitative analysis. Part II uses authentic video-recorded initial sales meetings and multi-modal conversation analysis (CA) to study rapport building techniques and skills in real-life situations. Part III presents a follow-up study to understand the effectiveness of salespeople's actions in terms of rapport building based on meeting outcomes. We conclude by synthesizing the results, proposing necessary tasks and skills while discussing implications for future research and practice.

2. Literature review

Rapport building is an initial phase in the larger project of developing mutually rewarding relationships with potential new customers. Dwyer et al. (1987) propose a framework for understanding marketing as a relationship rather than a discrete exchange. They conceptualize the process of deepening relationships as including awareness, exploration, expansion, and commitment; notably, awareness occurs before the actual interaction. In the exploration phase, interaction begins, but the relationship is very fragile because there is no investment or interdependence. Attraction, communication, use of power, norm development, and expectation development characterize this phase. Rapport developed at this phase helps set the stage for latter stages of expansion and commitment, where interdependence increases, ultimately leading to a committed relationship where there is an implicit pledge to maintain the relationship.

Researchers have found that the quality of customer relationships involves the establishment of trust and commitment, a fact that has implications for the emergence of sales opportunities in complex selling contexts (Crosby et al., 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In addition, as business relationships prompt a long-term orientation, sales activities start to focus on building and maintaining relationships (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). Bendapudi and Berry (1997) argue that for service companies to remain competitive, they must continue to develop customer relationships, reducing customers' risk perceptions and encouraging relationship formation.

There is clearly a need to better understand the foundational interpersonal activities that lead to a salesperson and a buyer developing a relationship and, ultimately, producing long-term sales potential. The basic sales process starts the interpersonal relationship development through rapport building. Early authors delineated the sales process as consisting of a number of steps. The first step involving actual interpersonal contact was termed the “approach” or “rapport building” (e.g., Dubinsky, 1981; Nickels, Everett, & Klein, 1983; Plank & Dempsey, 1980). Considered critical for the remaining steps in the selling process or cycle, this stage is “... the first minute or minutes of a sale. It consists of the strategies and tactics employed by salespeople when gaining an audience and establishing initial rapport with the customer. The approach includes opening small talk, the handshake, eye contact, and generally making a good initial impression” (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, p. 14). Though theory has developed around related processes (e.g., relationship marketing, buyer-seller relationships), there has been a dearth of research on the specifics involved in this initial rapport building. Much of the relationship marketing literature has focused on organizational level relationships to the disadvantage of individual interpersonal research (e.g., Gabriellson, Julkunen, Koponen, & Pullins, 2017). Sales process work has been plagued by a theory-practice gap for a number of reasons (Pullins, Timonen, Kaski, & Holopainen, 2017), exacerbated by a continually changing sales process and resulting in calls for theory development (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Sheth & Sharma,

2007). Thus, we seek to contribute to theory development in the interpersonal sales process, specifically in terms of how initial rapport building efforts occur in complex co-creative contexts.

2.1. Rapport as a foundation for creating value through sales interactions

With the emergence of the value co-creation concept, many researchers have begun to assert that unplanned interactions between sellers and buyers can result in co-created value (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012; Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015; Kohtamäki & Rajala, 2016). The value co-creating interaction between sellers and buyers is not just a business activity but also a central way for companies to systematically relate and combine their activities, knowledge, and resources (Haas et al., 2012; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Ulaga and Eggert (2006) identify personal communication as a differentiator in supplier–customer relationships.

Because achieving productive collaboration and dialogue with customers requires highly functional, trusting relationships, it also challenges a salesperson's interactional skills in terms of creating relationships (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos, & Sager, 2012; Borg & Johnston, 2013; Haas et al., 2012; Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015). With the need for trusting relationships comes the need for strong initial rapport building (Manning et al., 2012).

Relational selling emphasizes interpersonal communication (Haas et al., 2012; Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015; Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007), including the ability to build rapport and express empathy. Interpersonal skills can create trust, understanding, and approval while enabling the interacting parties to get along, truly listen, and be empathetic (Borg & Johnston, 2013; McFarland, Rode, & Shervani, 2016; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). Moncrief, Marshall, and Lask (2006) suggest that consultative industrial selling involves high levels of relationship selling behavior, including skills such as building rapport, developing trust, asking questions, listening, adapting, and selling value (Moncrief et al., 2006).

Creating value through the concept of co-creation among participants has gained scholarly attention in recent years (Lusch, Vargo, & Gustafsson, 2016). However, further understanding and empirical evidence is still needed in terms of activities and mechanisms that create value through sales interactions. Understanding these mechanisms may result in better management of the entire value co-creation process. Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmman, Maglio, and Nenonen (2016) suggest focusing on actor engagement in value co-creation to make value creation elements more observable, designable, and manageable. The present study focuses on early salesperson and customer engagement in rapport building to further our understanding of the initial establishment of buyer-seller relationships.

2.2. Rapport building as a foundation for the new relationship

As previously mentioned, rapport building is the first step in developing a new relationship, requiring an ability to develop a sense of connection with customers. This connection is crucial in forming the trust needed to move past the exploration stage of the buyer–seller relationship (Campbell et al., 2006). Once established, rapport contributes to credibility and trust—elementary ingredients for a business relationship. From a value co-creation perspective, we assert that rapport building is a prerequisite to value co-creating interaction between sales meeting participants because their knowledge needs to be integrated, requiring existence of mutual understanding of each other's world.

The little work that has investigated rapport building fails to study it in complex B2B solution selling contexts. Weitz (1981) was one of the first scholars to suggest that the effectiveness of rapport might depend on the extent to which salespeople effectively adapt their behaviors to particular situations and customers. Later, Bienenbach, Bengtsson, and Wincent (2011) demonstrated a connection between rapport and brand

equity in service encounters. More recently, researchers have investigated how adaptive selling enhances customer loyalty (Chen & Jaramillo, 2014), empathy (Limbu, Jayachandran, Babin, & Peterson, 2016), and trust (Guenzi, De Luca, & Spiro, 2016); to date, however, such studies have overlooked its impact on rapport building in professional sales contexts.

Despite the dearth of academic work on rapport building, the extant literature continues to note its importance for collaboration in the context of selling complex services and solutions following a value-based selling approach (Haas et al., 2012; Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). These sales processes are more complex and idiosyncratic than those for consumer goods. For example, the sales interaction often takes place in the customer's domain, outside the control of salespeople. Meanwhile, the sales interaction should be oriented towards the customer's service use from which value arises (Grönroos, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Therefore, salespeople must engage more frequently in the interactional work of finding a common language and tone for the dialogue while varying their interaction and work styles based on the customer's demands. As an example, Chakrabarty, Widing, and Brown (2014) note that salespeople's performance hinges on their ability to detect and react appropriately to the customer's non-verbal cues affects.

To advance our understanding on rapport building, we bring in the social sciences literature and its conversation analysis (CA) method, an approach with some precedents in the B2B context. For instance, Clark et al. (2003) studied one verbal action through which salespeople were able to manage rapport with their prospective customers. Drawing on audio-recordings of B2B field sales encounters, they studied the salespeople's responses to customer assessments (i.e., evaluations of someone or something). In an overwhelming number of cases, the salesperson agreed with the customer's assessment. However, only certain kinds of agreeing responses led to rapport between the participants. Clark et al. (2003) demonstrated that salespeople were able to build rapport through an affiliating assessment that built on the customer's assessment and elicited further agreement, such as in the following three-turn sequence: First, customer's assessment "It's all trial and error," to which the salesperson responded with a second assessment, "This is it. It takes a long time to evaluate these things really," leading to the customer's third position agreement, "Well that's it." The researchers concluded that these extended sequences of verbal affiliation created rapport.

Though offering several insights, previous research has only considered the effect of rapport building on sales outcomes or focused on the seller's side of the dyad (Ahearne et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2012; Manning et al., 2012). Other studies have used only audio-recordings for data, thus missing the opportunity to conduct multi-modal analysis. Meanwhile, some research has focused only on one interactional activity, overlooking the complexity of sales meetings. To address these shortcomings, we seek to understand how rapport building takes place in a B2B sales context by interviewing the salespeople and their customers and by studying real-life authentic video-recorded business encounters between the same salespeople and customers.

3. Methods

Theory about rapport building in B2B contexts remains underdeveloped, and our research problem is a complex, multi-faceted social phenomenon. As such, we selected a qualitative grounded theory (GT) approach, as used in several recent marketing and sales studies (Flint, Woodruff, & Gardial, 2002; Johnson, 2015; Johnson & Sohi, 2016; Tuli et al., 2007; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Grounded theory is a qualitative research design that seeks to develop conceptual understanding based on data from participants who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It provides a framework for collecting and analyzing qualitative data (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000;

Johnson, 2015), helping to systematically assess similarities and differences in perspectives regarding the studied phenomenon. By applying the GT approach, we seek a deeper understanding of rapport building, providing explanations instead of empirical generalizations (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The research guidelines provided by Gioia et al. (2012) support our model of rapport building.

Consistent with GT, we use an inductive approach, starting with our questions about rapport building in the development of sales relationships, and continuing with video-recordings and analysis of real-life sales meetings. We employ an open-ended, exploratory data analysis process, using theoretical and empirical data interactively to develop our theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Turning to the interview and video-recorded data, we coded initial elements and grouped them until arriving at higher order concepts, grounding the study in salespeople's and customers' real-life practices in everyday work. We compared repeated instances of what salespeople say they do to build rapport to what they actually do based on analysis of video-recordings from naturally occurring authentic B2B sales. We also considered these observations in light of the prior literature to confirm our findings.

As marketing and sales research largely lacks studies directly relevant to B2B rapport building, we also draw from social sciences and linguistics research. For example, earlier studies show how small talk serves as relational talk in service encounters. Small talk initiations such as "It's warm in this office isn't it?" can achieve consensus between workers and clients while functioning as a bridge to more intimate talk (Coupland & Ylänne-McEwen, 2000). Officials may also use so called formulations (more about these in Chapter 4.2) to show that they recognize the client's experience and to demonstrate empathy, an important building block in relationships (e.g., psychotherapy interaction; Weiste & Peräkylä, 2013).

Ultimately, we utilize different academic traditions to form a novel methodological combination. In particular, we use qualitative interviews at two stages in our process, accompanied by conversational analysis of video-recorded interactions. Through this iterative process involving marketing and linguistics literature as well as empirical data, we develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under consideration.

3.1. Context

We purposefully constrained our study to the context of selling customized solutions and services in which rapport building is especially important. We imposed four other criteria to maintain rigor in our data analysis. First, our data include only naturally occurring authentic B2B sales interactions between real companies' salespeople and their real prospective customers; we did not use simulated situations or experiments with students or actors. Second, we focus on initial sales meetings with new prospective customers; the examined organizations and individuals had not conducted any previous business together. We thus analyze the very early exploration stage of new customer relationships, during the first face-to-face sales meetings. Third, because we assume that rapport-building dynamics differ in team-selling vs. one-on-one situations, we have focused on sales meetings with one-on-one participation from both sides of the dyad. Fourth, all participants, salespeople and customers, agreed upon the interviews and video-recordings of their sales meetings.

To increase our understanding of the skills necessary for rapport building, we implemented a multi-phase research project using multiple dyadic data sets collected in a single European country from four multinational firms that sell professional services and complex solutions in a B2B context. While these companies represent a convenience sample based upon their support of the research initiative, we used a theoretical sample in selecting participants within the firms (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, we attempted to increase external validity by incorporating various industries and positions while

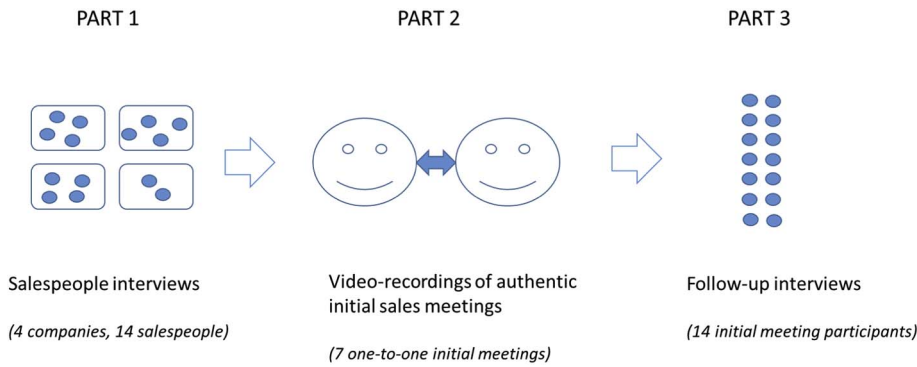


Fig. 1. The research process.

maintaining a focus on complex service selling situations. Two companies represent the information and communication technology (ICT) industry: a large corporation that offers information management solutions and a small enterprise that sells a communication platform for use in collaboration or education projects. The other two companies operate in the professional services sector, one offering human resources services, and the other providing management and strategy consultancy. To ensure confidentiality and gain trust, we also agreed on a legally binding research contract, including detailed agreements about anonymity, and data handling and storage.

3.2. Research design

As illustrated in Fig. 1, our three-part study uses distinct data sets and analysis methods.

The four companies produced seven sales cases. In Part 1 of our study, we interviewed 14 salespeople to understand what they say they do to build rapport. In Part 2, we observed seven of the interviewed salespeople in action via seven video-recorded initial sales meetings. We used conversation analysis (CA) to examine these early customer relationship formation efforts. Then, in Part 3, we interviewed the same prospective customers who participated in the seven videos in order to understand how customers perceived the rapport in those meetings. The interviews took place within one day of the sales meetings. We utilized follow-up interviews to assess the success of the video-recorded meetings. Success also was considered in light of meeting outcomes based on the sales organizations' internal meetings and continued interaction with clients. Finally, we combined and compared our qualitative interview findings with the results from the video-recorded sales interactions. By identifying and applying emerging concepts, we suggest a model for rapport building in B2B sales interactions.

To ensure consistency, we processed the data using ATLAS.ti software, specifically designed to organize qualitative data. In analyzing the data to find regularities and patterns, we recorded typical keywords and phrases that could represent emerging topics and themes. Although we did not establish any hypotheses a priori, patterns emerging from the data reflected salespeople's thoughts and actions towards prospective customers and interactions in initial sales meetings. Before discussing these findings in detail, we now provide a more detailed description of the data collection and analysis procedures for the three separate parts of our study.

3.3. Data collection

3.3.1. Part 1: qualitative analysis of salespeople's interviews

We combined a convenience and theoretical sampling scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Tuli et al., 2007). We applied convenience sampling when selecting the firm and theoretical sampling when determining relevant participants within the firms. We chose the firms from among our partners agreeing to participate in the research. The selection of partner firms was intentional and based on our interest in complex solution selling in the B2B services domain. There was a large research project involving

many companies already underway, so our company selection rested on this existing group of companies committed to the more general level research work. Similar to theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Tuli et al., 2007), we sought to select knowledgeable and relevant participants familiar with the rapport building phenomenon under study. We thus turned to the firms' managers to find the most suitable sales teams. After management communicated information about this research, we contacted the salespeople and arranged face-to-face interviews. As is typical for theoretical sampling, we used a snowball technique to find additional participants within the sales organizations. All individuals contacted agreed to participate. We chose participants without knowing anything about their performance or personal data, which provided natural variation in terms of interactional behavior. Both the researchers and managers guaranteed anonymity. The completed semi-structured interviews varied in length from 35 to 88 min, and interviewee profiles varied, as detailed in Table 1.

Using a snowball technique, we obtained a representative sample of various roles and organizational levels inherent in the sales process, including business managers, sales managers, salespeople, and content experts. All interviewees had at least four years of experience with their current companies. We taped and transcribed all interviews using a professional transcription service. We collected the data in sequences, in parallel with the analysis process, and continued the data collection until the findings started to converge; four interviews from each of the three larger companies were sufficient to reach this point. In total, we conducted fourteen in-depth interviews.

Questions for the salespeople were broad and open. We began with queries about their job roles and weekly routines before proceeding to detailed discussions of sales cases and meetings with prospective

Table 1 Dataset information – salespeople's interview sample.

No.	Role	Industry	Size	Job title	Sex	Experience ^a
1	Sales	ICT	Large	Sales Director	M	High
2	Sales	ICT	Large	Key Account Manager	M	Medium
3	Sales	ICT	Large	Sales Manager	M	Medium
4	Expert	ICT	Large	Business Consultant	M	High
5	Marketing	ICT	SME	Marketing Coordinator	F	Medium
6	Sales	ICT	SME	Sales Director	M	Medium
7	Management	HR services	Large	Business Manager	M	High
8	Sales	HR services	Large	Sales Director	M	High
9	Sales	HR services	Large	Sales Manager	F	Medium
10	Management	HR services	Large	Service Director	M	Medium
11	Sales	Consulting	SME	Sales Director	M	High
12	Management	Consulting	SME	CEO	F	Medium
13	Expert	Consulting	SME	Specialist	M	Medium
14	Expert	Consulting	SME	Specialist	M	High

^a Experience level: low experience 0–3 years, medium experience 4–9 years, high experience more than 10 years.

customers. To trigger more in-depth conversation, we asked interviewees to share recent sales cases, including step-by-step details. When necessary, we asked additional questions to continue the narratives. At the end of the interviews, we asked thematic questions regarding rapport building, such as the following: What is important when meeting new customers? How do you prepare? What role does atmosphere play? What creates a positive atmosphere? What creates good interpersonal “chemistry?” How do you build connection and rapport with new customers? What makes a sales interaction successful?

3.3.2. Part 2: videos of authentic B2B sales interactions

Previous research has noted the limitations of interview accounts, particularly in terms of how much they reveal about day-to-day sales work (Silverman, 1993); thus, we recorded initial sales meetings to add an empirical element to our understanding of rapport building in ordinary settings. In this way, we studied authentic sales interactions, an accomplishment achieved through the collaboration of salespeople and customers. From the initial interview sample, we selected buyer-seller interactions in which the sales manager, salesperson, and customer all agreed to the video-recording of an initial sales meeting. We continued the data collection process until we started to detect repetition in rapport building practices, and until we video-recorded a reasonable number of salespeople from Table 1.

For the actual recordings, the salesperson first contacted the customer. We installed one or two video cameras in the meeting room prior to each meeting. The researcher was not present during the video-recording. Overall, our data consist of seven video-recorded, naturally occurring B2B meetings between a salesperson and his or her prospective customer. The total running time is 506 min. Following the meetings, participants signed an agreement allowing the use of the video for research. We also collected field notes to record contextual information for each sales interaction.

3.3.3. Part 3: customer follow-up interviews

In the final stage, we compared our CA findings against follow-up interviews conducted with the salespeople and buyers participating in the video-recorded sales meetings. We conducted semi-structured interviews, 10–30 min in length, via telephone within one day of the actual sales meeting. We asked participants to recall the meeting and to provide their personal thoughts and feelings on how it went. Next, we posed more specific questions: to what extent did you experience mutual understanding and rapport? Do you have any worries or concerns regarding the potential relationship with the other party? What did you agree on as the next step for the sales process?

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. Part 1: salespeople interviews

We applied the GT approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as well as guidelines suggested by Gioia et al. (2012). We began analyzing data after the first three interviews, thus allowing us to incorporate initial findings into subsequent interviews while helping us to gain more in-depth information through the iterative data collection and analysis process. In the first order analysis, we coded the interview data and found 35 initial emerging codes (Gioia et al., 2012). To help assure the trustworthiness of the data, a graduate student independently conducted the first order analysis. A senior researcher also checked the credibility of the work by reading through the analysis and agreeing upon the initial coding results (Flint et al., 2002). We continued the analysis by identifying similarities and differences within the data classified into these codes, ending up with six compressed codes still using informants' own terminology and words. To improve confirmability, researchers independently re-analyzed the data

using the full transcriptions to gain a broader view of the context and narratives discussed in the interviews. Moreover, the authors checked the validity of the findings by reading through a larger set of interviews not included in the analysis process (because matching video-recordings were not available). The researchers then met to discuss the coding and reach consensus on the analysis results. Finally, to ensure a correct understanding and credibility, we applied member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member checking consists of “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Through this process, researchers can assess their emergent theory through the eyes of the study population, making changes as necessary. The researchers presented their results to a sample of interview participants who had a chance to discuss the findings. We also presented the results to outside practitioners and researchers. These sample groups agreed that the summary findings reflected their sales experiences. We continued to second order analysis, aiming to identify higher level emerging concepts in our data (Gioia et al., 2012). We present these second order findings in chapter 4.4, with a synthesis of results from the three studies and a model for rapport building.

3.4.2. Part 2: video recordings

To analyze the video-recorded sales interactions, we applied the CA approach, a well-established qualitative method for studying the details of social interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). CA follows three steps: data collection, transcription, and analysis. The collection relies on recordings of naturally occurring interaction, such that the recorded situations would have occurred even without the researcher's interest. Researchers thus do not organize the situation, nor do they give participants any advice on how to act. Such recorded data enable the researchers to make repeated observations of the situation rather than relying on their memories or notes.

The transcription method of CA reflects the principle that no detail of interaction can be dismissed a priori as irrelevant or accidental (Heritage, 1984). In principle, CA transcription aims to capture all possibly relevant aspects of talk-in-interaction. It details not only *what* is said but also *how*, including visible behavior, such as bodily gestures and facial expressions. However, the richness of every social interaction means that transcription is always selective; a transcript can never replace the actual recording of a situation (for a more extended discussion of CA transcription, see Hepburn & Bolden, 2013).

Finally, the analysis sought to understand how participants organize the social interaction, focusing on the participants' own understanding of the ongoing interaction, including actions, relationships, and expectations. An important starting point for the analysis is that after a turn-at-talk, the next speaker displays understanding by, for example, formulating an answer, giving an account, or laughing. In this manner, it becomes evident that the prior turn was understood as a request for information, an accusation, or a joke, respectively (see Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). The prior speaker can challenge these interpretations (e.g., “No, I was not joking”), but if there is no repair, the participants seem to have accomplished a mutual “good-enough” understanding of a given action.

In this study, analysis began with repeated watching of the video-recordings, leading us to identify practices (e.g., displays of a shared emotional stance) that the participants appeared to deploy in rapport building. After an observation, we tried to locate other instances of the practice. We ended up with a set of practices that seemed central to rapport building and began to analyze these practices by their generic features.

3.4.3. Part 3: customer follow-up interviews

Our analysis of the transcribed follow-up interviews followed a content analysis technique developed by Wallendorf and Belk (1989). We repeatedly read the text to identify key themes for each interviewee. To understand how participants experienced both rapport and meeting outcomes, we focused on narratives that offered insight into these aspects.

Two researchers independently developed the common themes found in the follow-up interviews specifically related to outcomes. Having identified the common themes, they compared results and reached strong overall agreement as to major themes. They jointly resolved any discrepancies in accordance with credibility standards for qualitative data analysis. A third researcher then compared findings against the data to re-assure the credibility of the results. The authors again implemented a member checking practice through company-specific workshops to allow participant comments on the findings. We found that their subjective experiences aligned with our findings. The multi-method approach also contributes to the credibility and confirmability of the analysis.

4. Findings

Turning to our findings, we present our analysis results for each of the three studies in chapters 4.1–4.3. In chapter 4.4, we identify emerging theoretical concepts from the analysis and synthesize our results into a model for building rapport in B2B sales interaction. Our analysis confirms that initial sales interactions in the context of professional sales are “moments of truth,” not only for companies but for the salespeople themselves. The salesperson's choices and actions influence how rapport and personal connection develop in social interaction.

4.1. Part I: findings from salespeople's in-depth interviews

In this chapter, we elaborate on the salespeople's experiences of initial sales meetings by considering the first order analysis. The results are coded and compressed into six meaningful actions for rapport building work with prospective customers. In chapter 4.4, we present the second order analysis combining the results of all three studies.

The interviewees described rapport building in many different ways. All salespeople took it seriously; none referred to rapport building as unimportant. They also perceived the early phases of initial meetings as decisive for the potential business relationship. We analyzed their reported actions, as described when reflecting on past situations. Their expressed actions represented a wide variety of possibilities for building rapport. The 14 interviews produced an extensive range of examples from dozens of initial meetings with potential customers. According to our first order analysis, participants' experiences can be presented into six categories, as summarized in Table 2.

4.1.1. Undergoing mental preparation and orientation

Many salespeople prepared for the initial sales in two forms. First, salespeople studied the prospective business, organization, and people. Their preparation checklists included questions such as the following: What are the customers' work and interaction styles? What are their professional areas of expertise and interests? For these tasks, salespeople often used Internet sources and tacit knowledge derived from their personal network or home organization. Many academic studies suggest that knowing the customer is a crucial springboard for establishing a relationship with business customers. However, the literature emphasizes understanding the customer's business rather than the individual (e.g., Lusch et al., 2016; Pryor, Malshe, & Paradise, 2013; Rapp et al., 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Second, salespeople reported developing a focused, confident, and inspired mindset before the meeting. Their mental orientation had to be open to social interaction with the customer, enabling rapport building as the following excerpts indicate:

Once you are sure and strong with your own substantial things like

what you are selling; after that, you can fully focus on the customers as people, to try to understand what kind of human being it is to whom you are selling something.... All interaction situations are different, and you can't know it beforehand; you need to be prepared to be present.

(Sales consultant, ICT Services).

I try to go through the case in my mind and think about my inspiration and personal motives. Why am I interested in this case? So that I can create a genuine enthusiasm towards the customer...I look forward to finding something new with the customer.

(Sales manager, HR Services).

The salespeople often emphasized their role in forming the customer's impression of the potential deal, especially for professional services. Many participants expressed that interacting with a customer is stressful and demands a high level of attentiveness. To succeed in building rapport, one needs to develop tools to concentrate on the customer, yet the extant literature includes few studies on this aspect of selling. Some studies touch on the topic from the perspectives of listening or empathy (e.g. Comer & Drollinger, 1999; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). In our data, most salespeople reported practices such as meditation, self-talk, or music practices that help them mentally focus on the upcoming situation. Interviewees provided the following examples:

Music gives me a very good feeling and concentration.... Always when I drive from Hyvinkää to Helsinki (to a customer meeting), I listen to the Fireball several times; it just makes me feel good. I turn it up to maximum volume, and I think that “Oh yeah, I can, I am capable of doing this, I will achieve it.”

(Salesperson, Strategy Solutions).

I have a routine that always prior to an important customer meeting, I go to a car wash. I carefully clean the car, and in the process, I prepare my mind.

(Salesperson, ICT Services).

Just before I open the door to the customer's office, I say to myself: “This is why I was born, this is why I am doing this work, this is my case!”

(Sales director, HR Services).

4.1.2. Taking an informal approach

Salespeople also reported behaving in an informal or casual manner while remaining professional. We interpret such data as an effort to avoid the stereotypical view of a well-trained, extroverted salesperson with a pushy or aggressive “I-know-it-all” attitude. Respondents wanted to be more approachable, as indicated in the following quotes:

I suggested we go to a cafeteria nearby. We were just drinking coffee, and the customer was sitting next to the window and looking at people passing by.... Usually I don't start interviewing with straight questions.... After a while, I started to ask about how their projects were going. One-by-one. Who is doing what and so on? Slowly, he started to tell me about them and suddenly he noticed that oh well, actually there is an issue with this and this.... So we ended up proceeding to a proposal.... So, something you need to ask so that the customer starts to open up about his daily life somehow.

(Salesperson, HR Services).

I am not a kind of “high-pressure salesman.” I try to take a relaxed approach, not to push the customer at all. In the beginning, I am there just to familiarize myself and listen to the customer.

(Salesperson, ICT Services).

4.1.3. Small talk

Small talk—concrete yet unnecessary conversational sequences (Maynard & Hudak, 2008)—was reported as a typical practice deployed

Table 2
Categories of salespeople's rapport building actions as recalled by the participants themselves.

First order codes	Compressed first order categories	Explanation
- Homework - Preparation - Customer knowledge - Motivation - Stress removal - Presence - Inspiration - Self-confidence	1. Undergoing mental preparation and orientation	Previewing the customer's profile and planning accordingly. Self-talk and meditation before entering the initial meeting. Thinking about and clarifying one's own motivation and inspiration.
- Informal style - Humor - Genuine style - Being a real person - Relaxed approach - Interest in customer	2. Showing informality and originality	Taking a purposefully informal approach through talking style (e.g., dialect) and clothing, making human "mistakes," and using humor. Being a genuine person, avoiding the impression of a well-trained "stereotypical" salesperson.
- Finding the right tone - Settling down - Finding the right handles - Getting to know each other	3. Engaging in small talk	Finding a shared tone and speed, using humor, discussing non-business topics on shared interests, collecting background information to get the right "handles" for later business talks.
- Sensing the customer's style - Observing the customer's personality - Sensing the customer's emotional status - Demonstrating similar behavior and thoughts	4. Demonstrating similarity	Observing customer behavior (speed, willingness to control, extroversion, knowledge orientation, sense of humor, decision-making style) and emotional stances to adapt one's own behavior accordingly.
- Concentration - Eye contact - Body language - Nodding - Smiling - Using notebook and pen - Asking questions - Empathy	5. Listening	Showing empathy and genuine interest in the customer both personally and professionally. Asking questions and following up on the customer's interests and his/her line of action. Using eye contact and body language.
- Intervention - Address negative issues - Establish purpose - Encourage positive signs - Optimism	6. Facilitating positive feelings	Identifying and removing customers' potentially negative feelings or addressing customers' disconnectedness and absentmindedness. Intervening and turning the tide when necessary. Reestablishing the purpose and inspiration for the meeting.

in rapport building. In the extant literature, small talk is known to establish personal relationships with new acquaintances; it "oils the social wheels" (Holmes, 2000, p. 57). Our interview data confirm that practically all salespeople use small talk at the beginning of the initial meeting. According to the participants, initial sales meetings sometimes consist of nothing but small talk. Among our interviewees, the extent of small talk varied a great deal from salesperson to salesperson and from customer to customer. Generally, according to the informant, the purpose of small talk seemed to be finding a common tone, reaching a mutual understanding, and obtaining alignment before proceeding to actual business issues. A salesperson from a strategy solutions company summarized this function as follows:

I see it as first creating an initial connection through non-business topics during sales interactions.
(Salesperson, Strategy Solutions).

Many salespeople pointed out that small talk should not be full of clichés or platitudes but instead original and personal. One salesperson told stories about how he used his newborn baby as a topic of conversation to build a sense of connection. Thus, small talk can play a dominant role in the initial sales meeting:

Once I had a customer where we discussed 1.5 h of anything else but business. He was a motorist, too, so we talked about motorcycles and renovating them. Then, we finally handled the business very quickly. This is my style.
(Salesperson, ICT Services).

4.1.4. Demonstrating similarity

Some salesperson actions aimed to create a sense of "social fit" and belonging. An underlying assumption indicates that customers like salespeople who are similar to them, possibly leading to easier collaboration. The concept of adaptability is well-established in the extant literature (e.g., Friend, Curasi, Boles, & Bellenger, 2014; Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011). In our data, salespeople demonstrated the basic ideas of adaptability even if they did not specifically use the word "adaptability." Several stories of attempting to be similar to the customer in various aspects indicate that salespeople see adaptability as an important tool for building rapport.

Typical actions in interviews included observing the customer, identifying personal profiles, and modifying the interaction style accordingly. Salespeople seemed to agree on the importance of social fit and chemistry during the sales meeting, as illustrated by this anecdote:

If you were a customer buying a BMW, how you feel about the salesperson would also be important. But, especially here when we are talking about professional services.... I argue that the person, him or herself and how we interact with the customer and make the connection leads to the deal.
(Salesperson, HR Services).

Interviewees often mentioned that in addition to pre-meeting homework, salespeople must develop the sensitivity required to observe customers and take cues into account. Salespeople seemed to observe and "read the customer." In trying to identify customer characteristics, they noticed and responded to a range of personal parameters, varying from the extent of humor and extroversion to the speed of discussion and processing:

It comes out if I, in the very beginning, tell a funny story or a joke, something I have been laughing at myself about recently, so I try that one and then see how they react, what are their feelings. If it is slightly embarrassing, then I know I need to become more serious. (Salesperson, Strategy Solutions).

I observe the customer's feelings, one would need to be a little bit...I am this kind of straight-talking person, so I need to see how to regulate my talking style. Often I notice that "OK well, this is now more slow and calm, so I need to calm down and be more sensitive." I go with the customer's style. (Salesperson, HR Services).

However, the salespeople were divided into opposing groups on this point. One group accepted these socially adaptive activities, but the other group asserted that it is impossible to change a situation's chemistry or social fit. Some mentioned that they noticed when they were not the best person for a particular customer case, such that they withdrew and transferred the customer to a colleague. One salesperson claimed that the customer had such a negative attitude and mindset that it was not worth trying, so he just went through with the presentation and finished the meeting. Many salespeople mentioned this aspect of adaptation as a natural and enjoyable part of their work. Some found themselves inspired by it, though others considered it unpleasant, demanding, or stressful.

4.1.5. Active listening

In terms of rapport building, participants reported that the main purpose of listening was to show genuine interest in customers, ultimately reflecting their orientations. Active listening refers to a complete focus on customer responsiveness, including body language, as well as components like sensing, evaluating, and responding (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). Requiring an empathetic attitude and displays of empathy (e.g. Comer & Drollinger, 1999), listening was frequently mentioned by the salespeople:

I know salespeople often talk too much. Thus, I try to calm down, be present for the customer, and make eye contact, so that I really send the message that I care about him. Then I write notes and ask additional questions to make sure I understood what the customer was saying. I don't always understand, so I ask the customer to tell me once more so that I understand.

(Sales consultant, Strategy Solutions).

What I usually do is that I try to value the customer's viewpoints and ideas. I am honest and say, "Well this is a nice idea, I hadn't been thinking this before ... could you tell more about that...let's elaborate on this further" ... or something like that... Always when a customer can throw out something, it is an appealing opportunity to create something good.

(Salesperson, ICT Services).

4.1.6. Facilitating positive feelings

We found that salespeople increasingly face challenging situations in new customer acquisition. They shared several instances in which circumstances were not very favorable, such as when the starting point for an initial meeting seemed volatile or questionable. Such situations demand that salespeople skillfully turn potentially negative situations into positive outcomes. Though salespeople found the issue important and recurrent, the extant literature provides little insight into managing negative customer feelings or attitudes, an area for future research. In particular, salespeople often faced situations in which customers were unwilling and unmotivated to use their time for initial meetings; they came to meetings feeling as if they were a "social responsibility." At the beginning of such challenging situations, salespeople typically used icebreakers, preferably humorous ones, or else they intervened immediately and proceeded with in-depth questions. Sometimes, a surprising coincidence emerged

It was in the town hall.... I said that now we would need some "currency" for the meeting. Then, the customer reminded me that the city mayor, also present at the meeting, had the surname of "currency." I didn't know that (hahaha), so I got a nice start for the meeting; we then had a very relaxed atmosphere. (Salesperson, Strategy Solutions).

One sales manager immediately reacted when the customer did not focus on the meeting but typed on his computer and seemed nervous and absent:

I was surprised when coming into the customer's place how busy and nervous the buyer seemed to be. We had just a little time to talk... Jean was really impatient and nervous, typing on his computer, etc. I had to say to him to "Give me 5 minutes, let me explain to you in 5 minutes, and then we discuss for 10 minutes. Then we can move onto other jobs." This worked.

(Sales manager, HR Services).

Another salesperson mentioned that when customers exhibit a pessimistic attitude, he asks why they agreed to come to the meeting:

Do you have a business need you have to solve? What is it? Usually you can find the interest point of the customer, and that makes connection possible. There must be a reason why the customer took time for the meeting.

(Sales consultant, Strategy Solutions).

Another even said that she likes people who seem difficult:

I have such a desire that I find it to be a lovely challenge. I want to get to these situations and turn them positive. I love to take the devils out of the customer's mind and see the person softening. An example: "Hey, Sam, do I interpret correctly ... have you somehow experienced something negative regarding this, has something negative or worrisome come from our side? I feel you may have something on your mind." (Salesperson, ICT Solutions).

4.2. Part 2: findings from the video-recorded sales meetings

Using seven video-recorded initial sales encounters as the data and CA as the method, we analyzed relationship and rapport building between unacquainted salespeople and their potential customers. In CA, a relationship is a social artifact accomplished via interaction (Clark et al., 2003), "something that is subject to on-going, step-by-step management within talk between persons, rather than a state of affairs that underlies their talk" (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984, p. 302). Thus, a relationship, as well as the rapport building in it, is a collaborative accomplishment, managed second-by-second in the interaction between a salesperson and the potential customer.

Earlier studies tied rapport building to participants having some perceived or extrinsic similarity to one another. These similarities may arise fortuitously or incidentally (Jiang, Hoegg, Dahl, & Chattopadhyay, 2009), as was the case in one of our recordings. In it, the customer noticed that the salesperson's bag had a BMW sign on it, leading to extended talk about a shared passion for cars. Nevertheless, such fortuitous similarities are rare and cannot be relied on as a method for rapport building. Therefore, instead of fortuitous similarities, we focused on systematic practices through which salespeople achieve similarities and establish rapport with their customers. Furthermore, much of the prior research on rapport building has concentrated on non-verbal expressions of attentiveness and interest, such as smiling, head nodding, forward leaning, and postural sharing or "mirroring" (see Duggan & Parrott, 2001; Heintzman, Leathers, Parrott, & Cairns, 1993; LaFrance, 1979). However, our primary focus is on the verbal practices that the salespeople deploy; arguably, participants may regard verbal, "on-the-record" evidence of agreement as having socially obligating impacts on the relationship and sales encounter (Clark et al., 2003).

Our study identified interactional practices related to both

structural and affective (emotional) level of cooperation. Structurally, alignment (Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011) is an important factor in rapport building. By aligning with a customer, the salesperson fur-

meeting held in a customer's office. The salesperson (SP) is signing the permission form for the video to be used in the research project, and the customer (Buyer) initiates small talk.¹

- 1 Buyer: (kolme) viikkoo töissä ja sitte neljä viikkoa lomalla ja,
(three) weeks at work and then four weeks on holiday and,
- 2 SP: .mth
- 3 Buyer: sitte< kolome viikkoo töissä ja sit kaks viikkoo lomalla
then three weeks at work and then two weeks on holiday
- 4 °sit se on (--)
then it is (--)
- 5 (0.2)
- 6 Buyer: ei oo ihan opettajan kesälomat mut melekei.
not quite like teacher's summer holidays but almost
- 7 SP: mutta< e- meleko mukavasti.
but e- quite nice
- 8 Buyer: on. °on on.°
is. is is (='that is true')
- 9 SP: nii että välillä tota käyvään vähän töissä mutta taas
so that every now and then you'll work a little but then
- 10 sitte niinku jatketaan.
again like continue.
- 11 Buyer: taas jatketaan harjotuksia.
again we continue exercises
- 12 (0.2)
- 13 SP: eikö seki, siinäki o aina oma homma että nää pääset taas
isn't that too, it too has always its own work to get going
- 14 kylykeen tähän näi ja,=
with this ((work)) again and
- 15 Buyer: =o. iha tasan tarkkaa.
=((it)) has. exactly so
- 16 SP: nii,
yes

thers the line of action initiated by the customer instead of initiating a new one. Second, on the affective level, affiliation is an overarching theme in rapport-building practices. Displays of affiliation are “actions with which a recipient displays that s/he supports the affective stance expressed by the speaker” (Lindström & Sorjonen, 2013, p. 351; see also Jefferson, 1988, 2002). We identified three main categories of verbal practices that salespeople deploy to build and maintain rapport in B2B interactions: (1) small talk, (2) aligning and affiliating with the customer, and (3) second stories. These categories can overlap, and they can be implemented simultaneously through a single action.

Small talk, already discussed in the interview findings, is the first category of practices deployed in video-recordings. Small talk refers to concrete conversational sequences that are not necessary to the instrumental task (Maynard & Hudak, 2008). However, the actual accomplishment of small talk in real B2B sales meetings remains largely unexplored. Our analysis shows that small talk encourages agreement and a shared stance between the salesperson and the customer, which facilitates social solidarity. In practice, the initiation of small talk often is regarded as the salesperson's responsibility, but our data suggest that it was in the interest of both the customer and the salesperson to create a comfortable connection.

The following example occurred in the very first seconds of a

In lines 1–4, the customer (Buyer) tells a story about his upcoming holidays. This talk is not necessary to the instrumental task of the situation and can be regarded as small talk. As is common for small-talk sequences in our data, the salesperson not only claims understanding of the customer's small talk by saying “I see” or “that's right,” but aligns with the customer by continuing his initiated line of action. First, the salesperson offers a *nii että* (“so that”) initiated formulation (Drew, 2002), a rephrased version of the upshot of the customer's story (“so that every now and then you'll work a little,” line 9). Instead of claiming understanding, this formulation explicitly shows her understanding of the customer's story and elicits agreement. The customer confirms the salesperson's formulation with a reference to “continu[ing] exercises” (line 11).

Second, the salesperson affiliates with the customer by adopting his side and supporting his implied affective (emotional) stance by offering an empathetic assessment of the problems associated with customers' repeatedly short holidays. The assessment is initiated by a polar (yes/

¹ The original Finnish conversation is translated into English in a fairly literal way. The symbols used in transcribing the video-recorded sales meetings are explained in Appendix 1. All names in our examples have been changed.

no) negative question *eikö seki* (“isn’t that,” line 13), which introduces the idea of shared knowledge to be confirmed by the customer (Halonen, 1996). In line 15, the customer confirms the problem and strongly agrees with the salesperson’s assessment, thus completing an extended sequence of mutual agreement that builds rapport.

In addition to aligning with the customer’s initiated action line (line 9) and affiliating with the customer’s affective stance (line 13), the salesperson appears to adjust her talk to match that of the customer. The customer uses dialect in pronouncing the word “melkein” (meaning “almost, nearly”) as *melekei* (line 6), and the salesperson uses the same dialect in pronouncing the word “melko” (“quite; fairly”) as *meleko* (line 7). Both speakers use dialect, so the situation arguably becomes less formal and more relaxed (Category 2, showing informality and originality; Category 3, small talk; Category 4, demonstrating similarity; Table 2).

Overall, the small talk initiated by the customer and advanced by the salesperson’s formulation in Example 1 leads to agreement and affiliation through a shared affective stance (Category 4, demonstrating similarity; Table 2). We argue that this affiliative agreement is the desired function of small talk in B2B encounters. That is, small talk is not random chat that is unnecessary to the instrumental task at hand; rather, it is a vehicle for mobilizing sequences of talk, allowing participants to agree and affiliate. It builds a solid ground for social solidarity, mutual understanding, and rapport.

Example 1 demonstrates that formulations are one method for salespeople to align with customers (i.e., to further a line of action initiated by the customer) and to offer them emotional support when engaging in small talk. Thus, formulations may implement two of the

three overall categories of rapport building that we identified: 1) small talk and 2) aligning and affiliating with the customer.

In addition to formulations, another multipurpose action related to rapport building is the second story (Sacks, 1992 [1968]). This term refers to a practice in which the salesperson—in response to a customer’s story expressing a stance—offers an extended (multi-clausal) description of a similar experience or state of affairs. The second story and the description of a similar experience allows the salesperson to show that s/he is fully attentive to the customer and to say “my mind is with you” (Sacks, 1992 [1970]; Category 1, mental preparation and orientation; Category 5, active listening; Table 2). Furthermore, a second story is a prime example of achieving similarity between the customer and the salesperson (Category 4, demonstrating similarity; Table 2). It endorses the emotional stance expressed by the customer and proposes a shared emotional experience, a central feature of rapport building (e.g., expressing attitude similarity as an ingratiation tactic; McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006).

In remarks that prefaced the conversation in Example 2, the salesperson commented that he does not use a computer but prefers a pen and paper. The salesperson and the customer then criticized people’s dependence on computers during business meetings, and the customer began to talk about cultural differences, noting that it is part of the Lutheran work ethic to “jam-pack” one’s PowerPoint slides. The salesperson, after an audible intake of breath, began to display disagreement (“it is but”; see Pomerantz, 1984, for turn-design features associated with the displays of disagreement with a prior speaker’s assessment), but the customer rushed to give another example of a cultural difference in public appearances, as this excerpt reveals:

- 01 Buyer: ja sit toinen ni jos oot huomannu ni (.) suomalaisessa
and then another thing if you have noticed (.) in Finnish
- 02 kulttuurissa ni yritysjohdosta politikoihin mihin tahansa
culture from business leaders to politics where ever
- 03 ni se on ihan ookoo et sä luet paperista.
it is perfectly ok to read from a paper
- 04 SP: joo.
yes
- 05 Buyer: se ei oo ikinä ollu paha.
it has never been a foul
- 06 SP: Ejoj. o.
yes
- 07 (.)
- 08 Buyer: meet espanja italia (.) puhumattakaan jenkit,
go to Spain Italy (.) not to mention the States
- 09 (0.2)
- 10 SP: joo.
yes
- 11 Buyer: englanti, (0.2) eihän eihän kukaan edes sillon kun morsiamen isä
England (0.2) no one even then when the father of the bride
- 12 ketä on on tota öö ↑maanviljelijä.
who is is a ehm farmer
- 13 SP: joo.
yes
- 14 Buyer: sekään ei alennu siihen et se lukis paperista.
even he doesn't lower himself to reading from a paper
- 15 SP: .hh Suomessa tasavallan presidentti pitää, virkaanastujaispuheen se
in Finland the president of the republic having an inaugural speech
- 16 lukee paperista ihan suoraa.
reads directly from a paper
- 17 Buyer: jo(h)
y(h)eah ((with a laughter token))
- 18 SP: jenkeissä pressa lukee prompterista jostaki kaukaa
in the States the president reads from a prompter somewhere distant
- 19 Buyer: joo.
yes
- 20 SP: ja näyttää että muistaa ulkoo puheensa.
and looks like ((he/she)) has memorized her/his speech
- 21 Buyer: kyllä.
yes ((indeed))
- 22 SP: iso iso ero.
a big big difference
- 23 Buyer: iso ero. [iso ero.
a big difference big difference
- 24 SP: [on.
((it)) is

The customer's story includes affective (emotional) components that convey his disapproving stance towards reading a speech from a paper (e.g. *even he* ('a farmer') *doesn't lower himself to reading from a paper*, line 14). Then, in lines 15–20, the salesperson provides a second story by describing a similar, but upgraded example of Finnish speech culture,

mentioning the president of the republic. With this description, the salesperson aligns with the line of action initiated by the customer and discusses cultural differences. Furthermore, the salesperson affiliates with the customer's disapproving stance and, crucially, proposes that the participants share the same experience. Finally, the excerpt concludes with strong, affiliative agreement. The salesperson offers a

Table 3
Summary of rapport building video analysis.

Video-recorded sales meetings	Summary of findings from videos
1. ICT_1 and MACHINERY COMPANY	The salesperson misses some chances to build rapport and a relaxed atmosphere. Therefore, the meeting ends up being led mostly by the salesperson's monologue, and client input remains rather minimal. The atmosphere is even hostile at moments.
2. ICT_2 and LOGISTICS COMPANY (see Example 2 in chapter 4.2)	The salesperson and the client find shared interests from their personal lives. There are extended sequences of small talk. However, despite a great beginning, the meeting ends up being led by the salesperson. The salesperson follows his preplanned agenda and does not adequately adjust to the situation. Despite this fault, the next meeting is scheduled; good rapport building compensates for the minor interactional mistakes later on.
3. HR SERV_1 and CONSTRUCTION (see Example 1 in chapter 4.2)	The salesperson and the client build great rapport based on their similarities. There is extended small talk about their background from the same region and their holiday plans. The meeting is a success, and the client is active and involved in the discussion throughout the meeting. The meeting proceeded nicely as a dialogue, informally, according to the flow the customer wanted. There were no PowerPoint presentations used.
4. STRAT SOL_1 and TV COMPANY	The meeting proceeds to business talk quite early without much small talk. The salesperson and the client are not trying to find similarities. The atmosphere remains a bit charged. The salesperson did her job mainly according to the script planned for the meeting. Participants did not end up with a good dialogue. The salesperson tries to listen to the client but fails to find solutions that would truly be interesting to the client.
5. STRAT SOL_2 and TELECOM	The salesperson is successful in her questions and in her concentrated listening. The client is involved in the discussion, and the salesperson does not need to lead it. The atmosphere is easy even though there is not much small talk. Even though the small-talk period was short, the salesperson was very good at listening to the customer. She gave the customer time to talk, responded well to the customer's cues, and let the meeting follow the customer's interests.
6. ICT_3 and CITY HALL	After a short sequence of small talk, the customer is active from the very beginning. The atmosphere is relaxed. However, later, the salesperson stumbles over his words, and he seems nervous. The salesperson actively uses open questions and reflects the customer's messages back. There is a feeling of enthusiasm that transferred to the customer. In the end, the meeting is successful.
7. ICT_4 and Higher Education Organization	No small talk. The salesperson begins the meeting with questions about the background of the customer and makes notes of the answers. He displays his understanding of the customer's situation through formulations. The atmosphere is relaxed. During the first 30 min, the buyer is more active and asks questions, while the salesperson quickly answers. A no-problem meeting from the perspective of rapport building.

Table 4
Follow-up evaluation for each video-recorded meeting from the overall success perspective.

Video	Meeting outcomes	Customer quotes
1. ICT_1 and MACHINERY COMPANY	There was only a narrow consensus on a possible continuation of the relationship. However, based on customer feedback, the relationship did not seem potentially strong. The customer was partially frustrated and disconnected during the interaction.	<i>"The salesperson did prepare well. At times, the meeting proceeded slowly...I would have liked to speed it up... All the parts presented and discussed didn't really interest me...it was sometimes kind of 'semi-forced' listening for me."</i>
2. ICT_2 and LOGISTICS COMPANY	This was a successful initial meeting from the outcomes point of view. At the end of the meeting, both participants agreed upon next steps (in the later follow-up, we obtained information that a deal was made). The salesperson had done great homework by talking via phone to several customer organization managers prior to meeting the CEO. The customer was initially skeptical as they had an existing global contract with a competing supplier. However, the customer was satisfied after the meeting.	<i>"Well, it was quite a good and relaxed atmosphere. Convenient and fun, talking about cars and sports and everything. The person had a good 'touch,' was a knowledgeable and disciplined person, I liked his style. Didn't try to pretend to be a friend or so...He knew our house well, had studied our needs carefully beforehand, talked to many of our managers on the phone. It just feels good...I was a bit worried about the possibilities to do anything as we have an existing global contract. However, he presented a plan of how we could transition from the competitor to a new one with them. This was a promising sign. Therefore, I thought we could do something with them."</i>
3. HR SERV_1 and CONSTRUCTION	This also was a very successful meeting in terms of both the outcomes and customer feedback on rapport. The "letter of intent" was agreed on, and the customer promised to buy from this supplier when he started to place orders. The buyer was really impressed by the salesperson's interaction skills and overall professionalism.	<i>"It was a really good meeting. I like such a salesperson. She was confident and relaxed and natural, was able to speak in her own words, nothing like externally taught sales speeches. We discussed our needs and the operating models in a possible collaboration. She understood my thoughts perfectly. She listened to what I said and answered well...no moments of negative thoughts. I was impressed and definitely will turn to this person and company when I make the order."</i>
4. STRAT SOL_1 and TV COMPANY	This meeting could be described as unsuccessful in terms of continuation in the sales process. The outcome was "send me the materials over email and let's see." Customer feedback was "quite OK," but something was missing.	<i>"Oh... I got to know their thinking and approach, also some new ideas too... But well, there could have been more kinds of inspiration and a willingness for possible collaboration, something more..."</i>
5. STRAT SOL_2 and TELECOM	This meeting was successful as there was a clear continuation agreed on. The customer was also very satisfied with the rapport and connection created, as well as the whole meeting since it was a real dialogue focusing on topics meaningful for the customer.	<i>"It was a good meeting I think. They gave a good impression of themselves, very professional and knowledgeable... I had a good connection with the salesperson. Somehow, we had a genuine dialogue on what kind of situation we had here and what we need, etc. This salesperson did not have an aggressive style of pushing her own offerings and being arrogant (and selfish) like many salespeople. She really left room for a dialogue and listened to my thoughts."</i>
6. ICT_3 and CITY HALL	The salesperson succeeded in getting the customer's commitment for the next step. The seller and buyer came to a jointly-constructed conclusion, customizing the pricing model to fit to the customer's needs. They elaborated on two use cases on how to apply the solution in the customer's sphere. Also, they agreed on a plan to do the piloting.	<i>"I liked to discuss with this salesperson. The application is 'killer' I think. There are several potential benefits and reasons to progress. No negative comments concerning the sales interaction."</i>
7. ICT_4 and Higher Education Organization	In this initial meeting, the salesperson succeeded in getting some degree of commitment for the next step. The customer was satisfied with the meeting, and common understanding was achieved.	<i>"The atmosphere was nice I think; there was common understanding... Overall, I am satisfied with the sales presentation and was impressed about the usefulness of the cloud service they offer."</i>

Table 5
Six actions from emerging concepts in each study.

Step/studies	Capturing customer insight	Clearing one's own mind	Breaking the ice	Finding common ground	Establishing emotional connection	Maintain-ing close relationship
Study 1, f2f interviews	People knowledge	Intrinsic motivation Focusing mentally	Presence	Layperson approach Reading the customer	Turning the tide Humor	
Study 2, video-recordings & CA			Responsive small talk	Aligning with the customer Formulations	Displays of affiliation Second stories	Aligning with the customer Displays of affiliation
Study 3, follow-up interviews	Profession-alism	Commitment	Atmosphere	Genuine interest	Shared understand-ing	

concluding assessment (“a big, big difference,” line 22), and the customer agrees; at the same time, he implies that he held this stance earlier by repeating the evaluation twice (“a big difference, big difference,” line 23; cf. Sorjonen & Hakulinen, 2009). Then, overlapping with the customer’s turn, the salesperson asserts agreement with a verb repeat (line 24). Overall, the two stories in Example 2 (by the customer in lines 1–14, and by the salesperson in lines 15–22) display a similar, shared stance towards cultural differences, providing a foundation for rapport in their relationship (Category 3, small talk; Category 4, demonstrating similarity; Category 5, active listening; Table 2).

Interestingly, other studies have shown that professionals in interaction with their customers or patients (with one reported exception) do not offer second stories or descriptions of a similar experience. Rather, they uphold professional neutrality and only display that they understand their customer’s emotional experiences (Ruusuvuori, 2005; Sorjonen, 2006). The fact that the salespeople in our data do deploy second stories arguably relates to taking an informal approach (Category 2 in Table 2). In addition, this finding is further proof of salespeople orienting themselves to rapport building in recognition of the importance of developing personal relationships with customers in the B2B context.

With examples 1 and 2, we have shown how salespeople 1) use small talk to encourage affiliative agreement, 2) deploy formulations to demonstrate that they listen to and understand the customer, and 3) offer second stories to propose a shared emotional stance and experience with the customer. These actions share in common that, while expressing affiliation and agreement, they also elicit a further display of agreement from the customer, which in turn, leads to an extended sequence of displays of agreement. When people assess a state of affairs, they reveal a personal sense of something and a real or fabricated part of their identity to a co-participant, and when a co-participant agrees, s/he shows acceptance of that identity and claims that s/he is “at one with it” (Clark et al., 2003). Thus small talk, formulations, and second stories are powerful tools in building social solidarity and rapport.

Other practices for building rapport in the video recordings include complimenting the customer (e.g., “you are a very sales-oriented person”) and addressing possible problems in advance (“I understand that you have a global contract with another company and that’s fine”; see Category 6, facilitating positive feelings; Table 2). Furthermore, when customers are talking, salespeople should maintain eye contact and offer minimal responses, such as head nods at appropriate intervals, to show that they are listening and truly interested (Category 5, active listening; Table 2). If the rapport building fails at the beginning of the meeting, the task of the salesperson becomes more demanding. Successful rapport building leads to an easy connection that even allows for minor mistakes later on, such as making proposals for business collaboration too early. Of course, even successful rapport building does not guarantee a successful meeting (i.e., an advance in the sales process; Rackham, 1988), as the possible collaboration needs to be genuinely interesting for the customer.

We thus found support for many of the salespeople’s actions and behaviors identified in Part 1 (see Table 2) from our analysis of the video-recorded initial meetings. Table 3 summarizes the findings from each video.

We also determined that the actions that salespeople reported in interviews omitted some aspects of rapport building, particularly those that are performed in collaboration with (or initiated by) the customer. It clearly is important to be active in initiating rapport-building sequences, but salespeople also must be able to support the customer with suitable responsive actions, such as alignment, continuing the customer’s line of action, and affiliating with the emotional aspects of the customer’s talk. Such responsive performance might also include non-verbal actions, such as facial gestures, body language, eye contact, smiles, and head nods. Furthermore, laughter is an important resource in building a relaxed atmosphere. For example, previous researchers have considered reciprocal laughter between the participants in the telephone to be an occurrence of rapport (Lavin & Maynard, 2001; for laughter in business meetings, see Vöge, 2008).

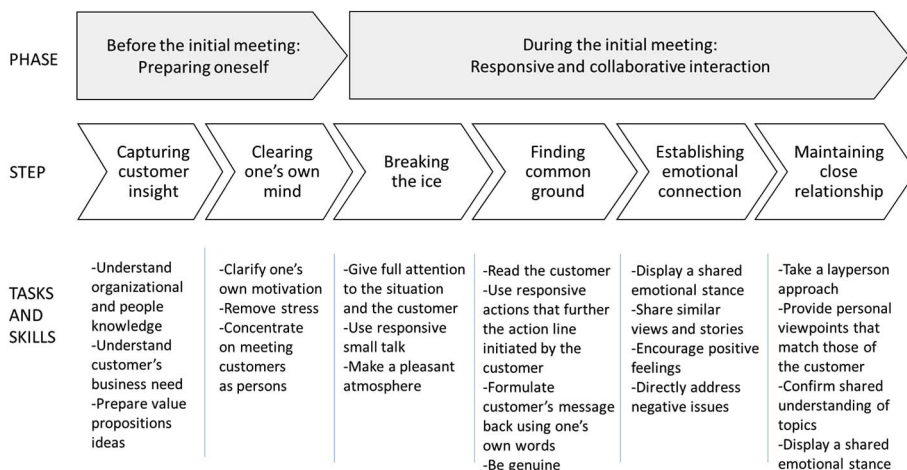


Fig. 2. A model to build rapport in B2B services and solution selling.

4.3. Part 3: analysis of follow-up interviews

The final part of our analysis focuses on follow-up interviews, reflecting on the meeting outcomes, understanding customers' experiences regarding rapport, and discussing the meetings' overall tenor. Table 4 summarizes the results with example quotes from customer follow-up interviews. The meeting outcomes are based on follow-up interviews with both salespeople and customers.

Our analysis of customer experiences confirms that customers can tell whether salespeople were successful in building rapport. It becomes evident that the actions outlined in Part 1 are not always implemented in practice, impacting the customer's overall feelings about a particular sales meeting. This general finding supports earlier studies on the existence of theory-practice gaps in professional sales (e.g. Pullins et al., 2017). For example, in case number 3 (HR services and a construction customer; see Example 1 in chapter 4.2), the salesperson demonstrated good mental orientation and presence, used an informal approach (e.g., using dialect), and employed small talk in sharing vacation plans. She also used active listening techniques and demonstrated a shared emotional stance to establish emotional connection with the customer. The salesperson was good at facilitating positive responses and feelings. Her skills in implementing these concepts into practice resulted in a strong connection with the customer and a very open and balanced interaction throughout the meeting. In the end, the customer felt appreciated and heard, mentioning trust in the salesperson and her professionalism. As a result, the customer wanted to do business with the company and with this specific salesperson. This type of rapport building supports value co-creation in buyer-seller relationships. It facilitates an emotional connection and the emergence of credibility and trust, enabling customers and salespeople to exchange and integrate their knowledge and resources in order to optimally fulfill the customer's needs together (Haas et al., 2012; Lusch et al., 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

In stark contrast, case number 1 (ICT and an industrial machinery business) confirms that a lack of rapport may easily lead to unsuccessful meetings. In this case, the salesperson did not try to find common ground or use small talk. It could be that the salesperson failed to prepare well enough or lacked sufficient mental presence. He neither demonstrated empathy nor active listening, instead rushing to his predefined presentation. The customer said afterwards that she felt obligated to listen to the monologue and that she was not sure whether they had a shared understanding of her needs or a potential solution. At the end of the meeting, the customer felt unsure about a possible collaboration.

4.4. Crafting a model for building rapport

In this section, we combine the analysis results of the three studies and develop a model for rapport building. In so doing, we aim to identify additional theoretical second order concepts emerging from our analysis. Our multi-phase analysis provides a comprehensive view on how to build rapport in such a way that customers feel engaged, heard, and appreciated in the sales interaction. Findings from study 1 emphasize the salesperson's own preparation and his/her initiation of interaction sequences. Study 2 allows us to discover collaborative practices through direct observation of authentic B2B sales meetings without involving salespeople's self-assessment and bias, thus enabling a focus on detailed scrutiny and quality of the actual sales interaction phase. Study 3 then provides us with further confirmation by assessing meeting outcomes and reflecting on customers' perspectives and experiences in rapport with the respective salespeople.

Based on this analysis, we identified the concepts emerging across all three studies. The skill of rapport building seemed to involve six actions: capturing customer insight, clearing one's own mind, breaking the ice, finding common ground, establishing emotional connection, and maintaining a close relationship. Table 5 illustrates these concepts and the respective studies identifying these actions.

Studies 1 and 2 suggest that rapport building unfolds according to six particular actions or steps before and during the initial sales meetings with prospective customers. Our earlier findings allowed us to identify higher order concepts that explain the results emerging from our data. In Fig. 2, we put these concepts into actionable tasks and skills presented as a rapport building model.

The first phase of the rapport building model focuses on salesperson preparation tasks prior to meeting. The first action deals with becoming aware of the customer's business needs, whereas the second action involves preparing oneself mentally and physically. The second phase, with its four action steps, illustrates the responsive and collaborative tasks and skills needed to build rapport during the initial sales interaction with prospective customers. Our multi-phase analysis suggests that a salesperson's preparatory actions before the initial sales meeting are important in ensuring full presence, confidence, and authenticity. During the sales interaction, the salesperson can apply the four actions in any sequence, using these actions throughout the initial meeting to guide the sales interaction as it unfolds.

5. Discussion and implications

In the present paper, we have investigated rapport building in the B2B service and solution selling context through a three-part qualitative study following grounded theory. Based on informants' experiences and insights, we have synthesized findings into a model for building rapport. Our multi-part study advances in-depth understanding for the multi-faceted social phenomenon of rapport building. Our analysis suggests that a lack of rapport can have both immediate and lasting negative consequences. There is little chance that an initial meeting lacking rapport will lead to a co-creative business relationship, but good rapport at this initial sales meeting can compensate for weaker interaction performance later.

Contrary to the extant literature, our multi-study analysis indicates that rapport occurs mainly through responsive and collaborative actions, rather than salesperson-initiated sequences. The reported rapport-building actions mostly related to salespeople's initiative actions, indicating that participants paid less attention to responsive and collaborative actions, even though they are just as important as initiative actions. In responsive and collaborative actions, salespeople put customers first by being sensitive and responsive to their initiatives rather than trying to force strong initiatives themselves. It is important to identify and adapt to customers' preferences, personal styles, and emotional stances. However, our videos revealed that salespeople sometimes assumed manners of adapting and responding that were too simple and direct, such as being too eager to agree with the customer's replies and comments. In essence, adaptation fails if the salesperson is unable to add something to the customer's turn (e.g., sharing a personal experience or showing an empathetic reaction). Without such additions, the salesperson begins to lose credibility.

Our research also underscores the importance of small talk, a natural element of rapport building. Original personal styles appear to be much more effective than clichéd small talk, which can be perceived as false friendliness. Both short and extended episodes of small talk can assist in building rapport between the salesperson and buyer. However, there is no tactic that always works, making small talk a challenge to salespeople who must sensitively adapt to emergent situations.

Fig. 2 emphasizes that building rapport involves interactional and emotional work. Building rapport requires situational sensitivity, emotional skills, and dialogue tools to engage customers in new business collaborations. Important skills in early interaction also include full attentiveness to the situation, responsive small talk, and an ability to continue the customer's line of action while facilitating shared evaluations. The salesperson may also need to provide personal viewpoints that match the customer's, display shared emotional stances, and demonstrate an informal approach to work. These skills may be more essential in the value co-creative sales approach than in traditional

transactional sales, which involves product presentation, objection handling, and closing techniques. For salespeople to succeed in the emotionally demanding work of rapport building, their motives need to be clear. Customers can tell when salespeople are genuinely interested and when they come to meetings seeking to fulfill their own performance measures (e.g., maximizing the number of customer visits).

5.1. Contributions

This multi-part study contributes to our understanding of building rapport in complex solution and services selling in an authentic B2B prospective customer context. The results lead us to the following three assertions. First, building rapport requires responsive and collaborative actions rather than the salesperson-initiated sequences of actions or sales techniques that often are still taught to new generations of salespeople. Second, six typical actions can result in rapport. The first two are salesperson preparatory actions, while the other four are accomplished together with the customer, thus requiring a set of interactional skills. These tasks include knowing the customer, clearing one's own mind, breaking the ice, finding common ground, establishing emotional connections, and maintaining a close relationship. Third, a lack of rapport can have both immediate and lasting negative consequences, while successful rapport building may even allow for minor interactional or communication mistakes later on.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

This research makes theoretical contributions to both relationship marketing and sales research by shedding light on rapport building in the early exploration phase of a prospective customer relationship (Ahearne et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2016). There are four main contributions: First, our findings address a major research gap related to the formation of rapport in the early interpersonal relationship stage in B2B contexts. Extant studies confirm the effects of rapport, but they do not explain how it forms or which sales skills may be essential (Ahearne et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2012). We have advanced our understanding of rapport building by uncovering and explaining the tasks and skills required to build rapport, not just confirming the effect that rapport, as an outcome, can have. The extant literature provides a narrow view and explanation for rapport building. It focuses only on one interactional action that salespeople use, and hasn't yet utilized video recorded interactions (e.g. Clark et al., 2003). Our research design included the use of unique video-recorded data from authentic B2B sales interaction contexts and in-depth CA method, complemented by in-depth interviews and customer follow-up interviews. This allowed us to uncover the actions needed in rapport building and to craft a model that is grounded on real-life experiences of participants and researchers' observations. To our knowledge, such an approach has not been followed in previous marketing and sales research. To represent our findings, we suggest a model for rapport building (Fig. 2).

Second, we have made the phenomena of rapport building and early phase value co-creation more manageable and observable by uncovering the interactional tasks required in the formation of rapport (Storbacka et al., 2016). We argue that rapport building also paves the way towards value co-creating interaction as early signs of mutual trust and improved shared understanding may contribute to actors' successful knowledge integration that is elementary in value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). To be successful in knowledge integration, meeting participants need to have a shared understanding of the customer's context, shared meanings regarding topics, and they need to share the core terminology used in value co-creative interaction. Thus, there could already be a shared understanding of potential value for the customer. Therefore, the skills of product presentation, objections handling, or closing the sales may be less important and relevant. In contrast, interactional skills (including emotional skills) emerge as

important while bringing into question the role of traditional sales techniques. Certainly, this is an important question for future investigation.

Third, unlike earlier studies that discuss salesperson-centric actions in early phases of the sales process (e.g. Dubinsky, 1981; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Rackham, 1988), we found that rapport is built mainly through responsive and collaborative actions. Accordingly, our findings explain rapport formation in a novel and comprehensive micro-level way. Rapport building does not rely on the techniques usually taught in sales training (e.g., employing salesperson-centric small talk, using a purposefully enthusiastic voice, cheering up customers, or rushing through a predefined list of questions). These actions instead may result in a salesperson monologue and create a sense of disconnection or distrust in the salesperson by the customer. Instead, rapport is built more effectively through a natural, customer-focused attitude and interest in the interaction partner. Relying on an authentic focus on the customer along with collaborative, responsive actions, rapport building can lead to shared positive feelings between participants. In turn, these interactions may result in feelings of being heard and appreciated as professional individuals, leading to overall positive attitudes towards collaboration and possible business relationships. With such a foundation, rapport develops naturally through balanced dialogue and collaborative actions and the first step in the process towards customer commitment to further collaboration is taken. Our model for rapport building (Fig. 2) presents the required salesperson preparation, as well as responsive and collaborative social interaction tasks and skills that may be needed for successful rapport building.

Fourth, our study contributes to existing marketing and sales knowledge by developing and introducing a novel approach that combines various methods used in relationship marketing, sales research and social science studies. Applying a qualitative grounded theory approach to a phenomenon that is under-explained offers new insights into how and why something happens. We introduced the CA method, and thus we didn't need to rely only on participants' own memories or self-assessment, but we use direct observations of authentic initial B2B sales interaction. The success of this approach should encourage other scholars to consider new research methods and the use of authentic empirical data to understand real-life situations.

We also discovered an interesting discrepancy between what salespeople say they do and what they actually do. In our data, all salespeople noted the importance of being customer-oriented and genuinely having an interest in the customer. They said that they try to adapt their own interactional style to the customer's personal style and emotional stances. We found some evidence for this practice in the video recordings, but more frequently, salespeople tended to stick to their routines and preplanned agendas. As such, they were missing opportunities to build rapport and establish personal relationships.

Our study confirms earlier findings about the importance of relationship building strategies in the exploration stage of relationship development (e.g., Dwyer et al., 1987; Zhang et al., 2016). Earlier sales interaction studies emphasize more "technical" and process-related needs rather than comprehending the customer and achieving a high degree of engagement (Moncrief, 1986; Newton, 1973). Our findings complement Moncrief's later studies (Moncrief et al., 2006) arguing that consultative value-adding sales profiles require high degrees of interactional skills, such as building rapport. Focusing on the relationship and building a sense of connection in the initial exploration phase may be even more important than previously indicated. We have found that customer experiences and subjective feelings of social connection are decisive in the continuation of new relationships. Concerns that emerge during initial interactions can significantly hinder customers' willingness to collaborate. By contrast, success in building rapport in initial meetings leads to a positive tenor, creating early stage satisfaction in the customer's mind. Rapport serves as an important first step in a long-term buyer-seller relationship.

5.3. Managerial implications

Our findings have managerial implications for engaging new prospective customers in a highly collaborative, value co-creating sales process. Because traditional, salesperson-centric sales techniques appear to have little positive effect on rapport, we recommend that customer engagement activities in early stages of a relationship focus on responsive, collaborative actions, such as identifying common ground, sharing emotional connections, and continuing a customer's line of action. Our video-recorded data and follow-up interviews reveal that customers' judgments are most positive when salespeople apply responsive, rather than initiative, actions. Responsiveness is important for all topics introduced by customers—even if they seem less important to the salesperson.

This refocusing means that sales managers should reconsider their skill set and other requirements for selling to new customers. As such, salespeople's interactional skills may face new requirements. Our analysis suggests that the following skills play a key role in successfully building rapport and engaging customers in initial B2B sales interactions: clearing one's own mind in terms of motivation and stress, concentrating on customers as persons, participating in responsive small talk, continuing the customer's line of action, mirroring back ideas in one's own words, facilitating shared evaluations, displaying shared emotional stances, sharing similar views and stories, and confirming a shared understanding. Using such skills may contribute to customers' positive feelings and responses. These responses may involve an initial stage of trust and security, feelings of common understanding, and perceptions of being heard and appreciated.

The development of such salesperson skills challenges traditional company training practices, and learning these new interactional skills may require another person to observe one's performance and give recurrent feedback. For individual salespeople, learning may also require active reflective processes. Practicing and repeating new skills while reflecting on behavior may help salespeople put new interactional knowledge into practice. Making one's skills visible inside the sales organization may help salespeople and managers share and learn more effectively together.

Managers also should understand that salespeople need time, space, and freedom to apply such skills in each unique sales case. Initial customer encounters should not be handled as standard routines, led only by a “numbers game.” Natural social connections may fail when a salesperson's hands are tied by a company-instructed and directed model of how to behave and act. Salespeople need to be able to act naturally, so that they feel comfortable and relate more easily to each customer. Through such behavior, salespeople stand out as more genuine and credible to customers, resulting in the kind of rapport that advances relationships.

Managers also should devote more attention to interaction quality and the salesperson's ability to create strong initial rapport in prospective customer cases. They might offer mental support and coaching while granting salespeople the time and freedom to focus on an individual customer, encouraging them to act according to the situation's specific requirements.

To build new customer relationships and sell to prospective customers, sales managers should also consider hiring sales team members who exhibit something other than the typical, extroverted personality and interactional profile. Rather than directly applying standard sales techniques, question lists, and procedures, managers can help build rapport by encouraging more situational flexibility and responsiveness to customer cues, thus calling on intuition, sensitivity, creativity, and emotional intelligence. Talkative, extroverted salespeople may need to work on regulating their behavior to reflect the divergent needs of differing situations. When implementing these ideas, salespeople and managers must find a suitable balance between a reasonable amount of

time to succeed in initial sales meetings and the repeatability and efficiency of the sales process.

6. Limitations and further research

This qualitative research aimed to provide new insights into the phenomenon of rapport building. Continued research should test these findings with a larger data set. Our study context was limited to complex B2B services and solutions businesses. Additional work is needed to ascertain the broader application of these findings and to determine whether and how they apply in different industries with different product and service offerings. We chose a longitudinal study to gain insights into rapport building, but continued studies could extend the longitudinal periods of examination even further in order to determine whether and how rapport building varies over time and within relationships. In addition, our study focused on prospective customers in one-on-one settings in face-to-face meetings. Additional work is needed to advance our understanding of rapport formation in team and other selling contexts.

It often is pointed out that the use of video recordings may be a limitation in that participants may alter their behavior when they know they are being recorded. However, as has been noted in prior studies, the camera is not terribly problematic for participants who tend to forget its presence (Mondada, 2013). We asked the participants whether their performance was affected by the recording, and nearly all of them reported that they thought about the recording activity only for the first one or 2 min, if at all, and they confirmed that it did not disturb their business. Our observations as researchers align with these perceptions. As soon as the meetings started, the participants focused on business topics. We did not notice any behavior signaling that the video recording disturbed their interactions.

Our interview data revealed that salespeople often face challenging situations, such as customers not being positively inclined. Situations of limited time or stress from other projects naturally arise. If the topic discussed in the sales meeting is not urgent, the salesperson may find it challenging to build rapport. These situations could require different techniques than those demanded by neutral or positive settings. Further research could offer insight on how salespeople build rapport in these challenging situations. Because social interactions often involve cultural differences, additional research also could investigate these phenomena in other countries as well as in cross-cultural sales interaction contexts.

In summary, we offer evidence of the critical skill of rapport building in initial sales meetings for complex selling situations. Essential for trust building, rapport building is a collaborative process of establishing common ground. Successful rapport building sets the stage for future interactions, and it is our hope that this research sets the stage for further work in this important area.

Appendix A. CA Transcription symbols

- /,/? falling/level/rising intonation
- ↑/↓ pitch upstep/downstep at the start of the following syllable
- en emphasis indicated by underlining
- : lengthening of a sound
- [] overlapping talk
- () micropause, less than 0.2 s
- (0.5) silences timed in tenths of a second
- > < talk inside is at a faster pace than the surrounding talk
- < > talk inside is at a slower pace than the surrounding talk
- en < glottal stop
- a- cut off
- = latching of turns
- (joo) uncertain hearing

@joo@ change in voice quality
 #e# creaky voice
 °joo° talk inside is more quiet than the surrounding talk
 hh audible exhalation; also used to indicate breathiness at the end of an utterance
 hh audible inhalation
 — unclear talk, not heard by transcriber

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