Perceived Salesperson Authenticity in B2B-Relationships:
A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Marketing research is just beginning to understand customers' need for authenticity in marketing exchanges. While consumers seek authentic brands and consumption experience, industrial buyers appreciate authentic salespersons. However, marketing literature is silent about perceived salesperson authenticity. This paper's aim is to make an advance in closing this research gap. Therefore, we conceptualize perceived salesperson authenticity. In order to identify the dimensions and consequences of this construct, we apply grounded theory. We determine presence, empathy, competency, experience, out-of-the-box thinking, genuineness, stability of character, and congruency as dimensions of perceived salesperson authenticity. Perceived salesperson authenticity leads to credibility and trust and ultimately facilitates long-term relationships.

Keywords
Perceived Salesperson Authenticity, Trust, Buyer-Seller relationships, Grounded Theory

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1. Introduction

Relationship marketing highlights the importance of trust as a key predictor of loyalty (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002; Agustin & Singh, 2005). Trust is the cornerstone of successful long-term relationships between buyers and sellers, since it facilitates customer commitment and ultimately repeat patronage (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Doney & Cannon, 1997). Relationship marketing scientists have made considerable efforts to identify drivers of customer trust. Antecedents of customer trust are for instance competency (Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993) and salesperson likeability (Doney & Cannon, 1997), as well as the perceived quality and bonding activities of service providers (Gounaris, 2005).

Another likely driver of trust in buyer-seller relationships is salespersons' authenticity. Professional selling practice strongly advocates the active use of authenticity (e.g., Taran, 2010; Gitomer, 2004). According to Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003, p. 21), the "search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing." Moreover, the following quotes from purchasing professionals underline the importance of authenticity for successful buyer-seller relationships:

"Authenticity should always be a given. It doesn't matter whether we purchase a 1000 Euros' or 10 million Euros' worth of good." (Purchasing Manager, automotive company)	*"The success of a negotiation is significantly influenced by how authentic [...] the person is who is sitting there." (Lead Buyer R&D, multinational company)*

Authenticity is a major driver of trust (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Kernis 2003; George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007; May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003; Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, & Avey, 2009; Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009). More specifically, authenticity has been identified as an important antecedent to a leader's trustworthiness (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwal, 2005). Lately, brand management research discovered the importance of authenticity (e.g., Beverland & Farelly, 2009), finding that brands are more likely to be successful if they are perceived as authentic.

Despite the rather promising findings on how authenticity can contribute to building trust, neither the relationship marketing literature, business-to-business marketing literature nor professional selling literature have paid any attention to the construct of authenticity. In order to exploit the great potential of authenticity's impact on industrial buyer-seller relationships, it is indispensable to thoroughly conceptualize authenticity and to explore its consequences.

There is a substantial research gap when it comes to authenticity's nature and role in buyer-seller-relationships. In order to fill this gap, this paper provides two contributions. First, we conceptualize perceived salesperson authenticity and identify its dimensions. Second, we examine the relevance of authenticity in buyer-seller relationships.

2. Conceptual Background

The word "authenticity" derives from the ancient Greek, meaning "to be true to oneself" (Harter, 2002). Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes authenticity as "real, actual" and emphasizes the concept's link to trustworthiness (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 2003, p. 81–82). For more than 80 years, researchers have been investigating the phenomenon of authenticity from various perspectives (Gardner et al., 2005). Contributions have been made to different fields, including philosophy, sociology, and psychology (Novicevic, Harvey, Ronald, Brown, & Evans, 2006), and ultimately, marketing (e.g., Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Schaefer & Pettijohn, 2006).

Philosophers associate authenticity with ethical choices (Novicevic et al., 2006). Heidegger's (1927) idea of "winning oneself" by making authentic, self-motivated choices is considered the basis for research in authenticity. He also sees potential in acting inauthentically in times of radical social change. Sartre (1948) criticizes Heidegger's perspective and states that authenticity is solely positive. Authenticity is then the ability and

intention to balance personal interest and public responsibility. Also Adorno criticizes Heidegger's moral inconsistency and not only describes the need to balance one's development with public interest, but also considers it a responsibility to develop such capacity in others. This ethical foundation paves new ways for the management field (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Avolio et al., 2004) and has helped develop the moral component of authentic leadership.

A number of social psychologists (e.g., Erickson, 1995; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne,& Ilardi, 1997; Kernis, 2003) have emphasized authenticity's importance for individuals as well as society as a whole. They regard authenticity as trait or state, since they identify it as an individual-difference construct. In Kernis' widespread definition, he describes authenticity as "reflecting the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (2003, p. 13). Chen, Langner, and Mendoza-Denton (2009) reveal that the fit between dispositional power and role power leads to higher levels of self-expression and self-other congruence, which is understood as authenticity. Describing people's need for "freely chosen, self-determined, natural, genuine, unmasked, and unpretentious" self-perceived behavior, Schaefer and Pettijohn (2006) transferred this perspective to the professional selling literature.

Endrissat, Müller, and Kaudela-Baum (2007, p. 208) challenge this perspective on authenticity, regarding it "a personal innate quality." They consider authenticity a characteristic, which is attributed to people by others. This means, authenticity should be conceptualized as a perceptional construct (also see Fields, 2007). Consumer research proceeds in arguing that authenticity is socially constructed as "a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others" (Peterson, 2005, p. 1086). Beverland and Farrelly (2009), as well as Gilmore and Pine (2007) emphasize the importance of brands' perceived authenticity. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) compare authenticity with brands' aura, claiming that authentic brands exude originality. Based on the previous ideas we conceptualize perceived salesperson authenticity as customers' level of acceptance or rejection of a person's claim to manage the role of a salesperson.

Authenticity is characterized as a multidimensional construct (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). One fundamental dimension is perceived consistency, which is described as the alignment between words and deeds (Fields, 2007; Goffee & Jones 2005). Simons (2002) even considers this a definition for perceived behavioral integrity. A relationship between both constructs has been postulated before (e.g., Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009; Fields, 2007). Kernis (2003) describes four authenticity dimensions: awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational orientation (also see Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Awareness refers to the consciousness and knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses as well as confidence in oneself. Unbiased processing involves the true evaluation of self-relevant information. Subsequently, behavior means "acting in congruence with one's values, preferences, and needs" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 302). This dimension inhibits the aspect of integrity. Finally, the relational orientation explains people's intention to interact openly and truthfully in close relationships.

3. Methodology

In light of the research question at hand and due to the fact that research on perceived salesperson authenticity is still at an early stage, a grounded theory approach was applied in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. We conducted six person-to-person interviews and two focus-group sessions with German purchasing managers. All respondents could be regarded as experts, since they were all in leading positions with several years' buying experience – many of them having more than 20 years' experience. While the majority of respondents worked for large multinational industrial companies, some were affiliated with small or medium-sized companies or the public sector. The question setup was semi-structured in order to achieve a balance between gaining a maximum of relevant information

and controlling the flow of the interviews. As an example, respondents were asked to describe in their own words a concrete salesperson that they perceived as authentic. The answers to this and other questions were transcribed and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using open coding, both authors read the transcript independently and line-by-line, and identified concrete parts that were then tested for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).The coded sections were discussed and interpreted, leading to an acceptable level of intersubjectivity. Through axial coding, we built a set of categories, subcategories, and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006), and applied those to develop a nomological net of perceived salesperson authenticity. Finally, using selective coding, we refined our dimensions and theory, creating a comprehensive picture of authenticity.

4. Findings

The results of the qualitative analysis fall into two groups. The first group refers to the various dimensions of perceived salesperson authenticity, whereas the second group refers to the importance and the consequences of perceived salesperson authenticity. Figure 1 depicts the dimensions as well as the nomological net of perceived salesperson authenticity as established on the basis of the qualitative interviews.

Associations with authenticity displayed a wide variety of character traits and behavior patterns. However, most of the answers found in the different interviews were repetitive. Similar answers were classified as dimensions of authenticity, namely *presence, empathy, competency, experience, out-of-the-box thinking, genuineness, stability of character,* and *congruency*.

Figure 1: Dimensions and Nomological Net of Perceived Salesperson Authenticity
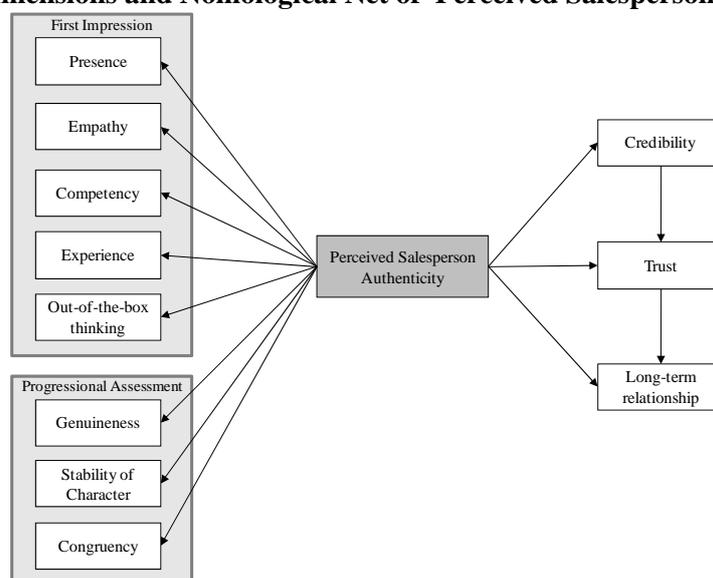
Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) describe business relationships as an ongoing process. We can confirm that the judgment of someone's authenticity is a process as well. We identified at least two stages: The *first impression* of the salesperson which can be judged in a short period of time and the *progressional assessment* of the person's behavior, which starts with the first impression and continues with future interactions. The different dimensions can be assigned to those two stages. As the following descriptions reveal, the first five aspects belong to the first impression, and the subsequent three ones can be assigned to the progressional stage.

Presence refers to the salesperson's general appearance. The person must be perceived as being open, communicative, extraverted, and approachable. In this relationship, many participants stated that a well-tended and professional look and good manners are important.

Empathy describes the salesperson's commitment to his or her work and conviction in his or her product. One participant responded to the question of whether authenticity can be taught with: "the love for what you are doing is not trainable", which also suggests empathy.

When asked about authenticity, ten of the eleven interview partners strongly associated it with *competency*. This is an important insight, since competency has never before been mentioned in the literature of authenticity. One participant mentioned that, in private life, competency is not relevant for determining someone's authenticity, but very relevant when it comes to business life. Here, some interviewees stated that specialized knowledge is required; others also stated that competency is of crucial importance when it comes to salespersons. The most frequent answer was that a general competency is more important than specialized knowledge. While it is a well-known fact that competence is an antecedent to trust (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman, 1993), its role as facet of perceived salesperson authenticity is new.

Moreover, the salesperson's amount of *experience* adds to his or her authenticity. This also refers to how long the person has been in the representing company and his or her gained knowledge of the relevant market.

Another dimension describes the authentic salesperson as someone who thinks globally and in the long-term, sees the bigger picture, and is open towards different cultures. We therefore called this dimension *out-of-the-box thinking*. One interviewee defined an authentic salesperson as someone who is "willing to sell his product to other cultures and is not restricted to selling it to his immediate environment."

The following aspects of authenticity can only be assessed after the relationship has continued for a certain time, and therefore belong to the second stage. Most definitions of authenticity in the literature refer to *Genuineness*, which is also the dimension we came across the most in our interviews' answers. Within this dimension, honesty was mentioned most frequently. This entails transparency when it comes to goals and the ability to point out problems. Another aspect is being true to oneself. This means that authentic salespersons do not put an act, but are themselves at all times. A number of interviewees also mentioned that authentic persons are especially recognizable in their ability to detect and admit weaknesses and mistakes. Correspondingly, one expert stated: "It is important and goes along with authenticity that the supplier exposes his own limits."

Stability of Character means that constancy and consistency are related to a salesperson's behavior. Constancy refers to direct and honest behavior. Consistency means behaving in a non-contradictory, reliable manner. This means someone "doesn't say a, think b and act c."

Concerning the outcomes of perceived salesperson authenticity, all our interview partners uniformly stated that salesperson authenticity was very important to them in their buying relationships. Furthermore, *credibility*, *trust,* and *long-term relationship* could be identified as consequences of authenticity. The resulting nomological net is in line with extant relationship marketing literature (e.g., Doney & Cannon, 1997; Ganesan, 1994).

5. Conclusion and Managerial Implications

Extant literature and numerous comments from our respondents support the notion that perceived salesperson authenticity is a pivotal antecedent of trust and thus long-term relationships. Actively managing the perceived salesperson authenticity appears to be a promising instrument for business-to-business marketing and professional selling.

This study's major contribution is the identification of the relevant facets or dimensions of perceived salesperson authenticity. First, we confirmed that our interviewed experts consider perceived salesperson authenticity very important. Second, the conceptualization of authenticity in buyer-seller relationships appears to be quite similar to its conceptualization in social psychology, although some differences cannot be ignored. Especially the influence of competency on perceived authenticity is novel. For the association within the buyer-seller

dyad, competency appears to be highly relevant. Third, we identified a layered structure of perceived salesperson authenticity. We propose a time-related structure, dividing the dimensions into those that can be judged within short notice and those that require a progressional assessment.

By means of the identified dimensions, marketers and professional salespeople alike can stipulate an effective and efficient increase in perceived salesperson authenticity, thereby fostering the development, maintenance, and enhancement of successful relational exchanges.

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