

Organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to propose a conceptual framework based on organisational and environmental indicators of business-to-business sellers' sales performance in services firms.

Design/methodology/approach – A descriptive research design was applied and data was gathered from 389 respondents across industries and different-sized services firms in Norway using a self-administered questionnaire.

Findings – Results show that the proposed six-dimensional framework of organisational and environmental indicators can be applied to manage seller–customer relationships in a business-to-business environment.

Research limitations/implications – A six-dimensional framework of organisational and environmental indicators is tested successfully in services firms.

Practical implications – Increasingly, services firms will need to work closely with business-to-business sellers to proactively adapt to market changes through a co-creation approach to build long-term seller–customer relationships.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, no previous study has focused on relationship marketing in business-to-business relationships that proposes a conceptual framework based on organisational and environmental indicators of business-to-business sellers' sales performance in services firms.

Keywords B2B, Sales performance, Services firms, External environment, Internal environment

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Marketing scholars have validated the vital role employees play in the service delivery process, but most studies are from a business-to-consumer (B2C) perspective (Manolis *et al.*, 2001; Zhao *et al.*, 2018). The experience of a customer in a business-to-business (B2B) market



environment is different from that in a B2C environment. B2B customers are industrial customers and it is important to the drivers influencing their expectations and perceptions towards the sellers (Habel *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, this study focuses on the organisational and environmental indicators of sales performance to enhance the sales and service agility of B2B sellers.

This study is founded on the seminal work of Churchill *et al.* (1985) and Verbeke *et al.* (2011), which provided an integrated framework of sales performance indicators grouped into five categories. Considering the work of Chakravarthy and Doz (1992), Churchill *et al.* (1985) and Jaworski (1988), Verbeke *et al.* (2011, p. 412) stated that the organisational and environmental indicators of sales performance are not explored extensively.

In this study, a framework is proposed and validated relating to organisational and environmental indicators of sales performance in B2B sellers from a service perspective. Numerous scholars – such as Aydin *et al.* (2017), Blocker *et al.* (2012), Darrat *et al.* (2017), Hohenschwert and Geiger (2015) and Limbu *et al.* (2016) – have argued that the variables proposed by Churchill *et al.* (1985) and Walker *et al.* (1977) cannot be considered the most prominent predictors of sales performance from a service perspective. Therefore, it should be noted that this study does not focus on the most prominent predictors of sales performance, but rather on organisational and environmental indicators as promulgated by Verbeke *et al.* (2011).

Several studies (Evans *et al.*, 2012; Kwak *et al.*, 2019; Ulaga and Kohli, 2018) have indicated a greater need to deepen the understanding of service delivery in driving sales performance in B2B contexts. To address this research gap, an understanding of organisational and environmental factors is critical in competitive B2B settings (Prajogo, 2016), as they influence the service delivery ability on the overall sales competitiveness of the seller in the marketplace (Basir *et al.*, 2010). Thus, this study considers organisational and environmental indicators as important drivers of sales performance from a seller's service perspective in a B2B environment.

2. Research relevance

The B2B environment has been characterised by a shift towards services as a differentiator in sales performance (Nezami *et al.*, 2018). In an ever-increasing competitive business environment, a key determinant of customer satisfaction is the delivery of a professional service offering (Alzaydi *et al.*, 2018). The service delivery engagement between a seller and a business customer directly influences the latter's perception of the former (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the service delivery process in a sales environment is driven primarily by human interaction, because the seller engages with the business customer through human interface (Habibi *et al.*, 2015).

Services literature has argued extensively that services and products are not similar in nature (Lin *et al.*, 2018; Lindberg and Nordin, 2008). From a sales performance perspective, the sale of services is dissimilar to the sale of products, especially considering the interlinked nature of the sales employee and the service being delivered (Ulaga and Loveland, 2014). As a result, service delivery has become a competitive tool in the customer engagement process. In light of this, an understanding of the organisational and external factors influencing the sales performance of sales employees from a service perspective becomes imperative in securing a competitive advantage for sellers in a B2B context.

B2B literature promulgates that industrial customers have specific expectations when buying from sellers. Subsequently, the contribution made by this study is twofold. Firstly, it provides knowledge on the various sub-elements of the organisation and the environment as sales performance drivers when considering service delivery by a B2B seller. Secondly, it provides an empirical foundation of a six-dimensional framework on organisational and

environmental indicators in sales performance from a service perspective for researchers and managers in a B2B environment.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Orientation to the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework to follow provides an orientation towards various important aspects in terms of the management of seller–customer relationships in a B2B environment. The discussion focuses on the importance of service engagement as a differentiating strategy to manage complex relationships in a B2B setting. This is followed by an overview of the theories grounding the study (relationship marketing theory and expectation-disconfirmation theory), the transition to transformational leadership in the management of seller–customer relationships, the conceptual framework proposed and an understanding of the different organisational and environmental indicators of sales performance from a service perspective.

3.2 Service engagement as a transformational approach in managing complex business-to-business relationships

The growing importance of employee commitment to service delivery and its influence on customer satisfaction and future sales growth has been acknowledged widely by marketing scholars (Bradford *et al.*, 2010; Jha *et al.*, 2017). Numerous studies in the personal selling and sales management domain (Kaski *et al.*, 2017; Mangus *et al.*, 2017) have highlighted that the B2B sales landscape is evolving because of enhanced B2B customer service management expectations and the need to develop strategic partnerships with fewer sellers. These industrial customers' decision-making is guided increasingly by their service experience with the seller and the influence this might have on their future business performance (Bell, 2017).

Consequently, employees' commitment, as a differentiator in the management of B2B customer expectations, has become a competitive contrivance for sellers (Tsybina and Rebiiazina, 2013). In the B2B context, "customer-oriented service providers – those who understand the buyer's needs and demonstrate concern for the buyer's welfare – will be supported" (Doney *et al.*, 2007, p. 1100). In the management of B2B customer relationships:

[...] interpersonal service is a core resource reflecting the seller's basic service-delivery skills; and value mindset is an augmented resource reflecting the seller's holistic understanding of the buyer's business context, value-realisation opportunities, and implementation pathway to value. (DeLeon and Chatterjee, 2017, p. 403)

Accordingly, customers' experience of value is guided by individual perceptions of the service experience, and not the sellers' views of the service experience provided (Tzempelikos and Kooli, 2018). Furthermore, customers want to experience a feeling of participation when engaging with sellers. This approach brings forth a desire for continuous communication and information sharing when customers engage with sellers on issues of product purchases or service management (Hur *et al.*, 2017).

Research (Ball and Barnes, 2017; Samiee *et al.*, 2015) has emphasised the importance of a relational approach to managing B2B relationships that is built on value-adding service deliverables to drive continuous engagement. A seller's relational approach is characterised by the service engagement and service management ability towards the B2B customer base that directly influences the B2B customer's satisfaction outcome (Gummesson *et al.*, 2014). The buyer's satisfaction outcome directly influences the intention to secure a continuation of the relationship, which impacts the seller's future sales volume (Mangus *et al.*, 2017; Meyer *et al.*, 2017). Considering this, Table 1 illustrates the relevance of the relationship marketing

Table 1.
A Theoretical lens towards long-term relationships through service delivery in a sales environment

Theory	Source	Key premise	Context	Importance to relationship building
Relationship marketing theory	Larentis <i>et al.</i> (2018)	High levels of customer service drive a sustainable competitive advantage and higher business performance	Multiple industries across Brazil	High levels of customer service are important to secure long-term relationship building between business partners and thereby future sales' growth potential
	Rasul (2017)	Through effective and engaging service delivery, relationships with customers are strengthened	European and American companies across industries	A service-oriented approach strengthens a customer's willingness to engage in a long-term relationship with a seller, thereby driving future sales
	Grönroos (2017)	The building and management of long-term relationships with customers are built around the overall quality of service delivery	Contextualising of service delivery importance in the context of relationship marketing	Service delivery to customers needs to be delivered as an experience that drives long-term relationship building and sales growth
	Miroudot and Cadestin (2017)	Service provision secures added value to B2B customers, thereby creating a long-term relationship building desire between parties	Manufacturing and commercial industries across 38 European countries	Professional service engagement by sellers results in positive value perceptions by B2B customers, thereby stimulating long-term relationship building intention
Expectation-disconfirmation theory	Roldán Bravo <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Customers' expectations determine the degree of satisfaction	Industrial customer satisfaction	Service engagement plays an important role in securing satisfaction
	Wasan (2018)	Customers use their expectations to evaluate performance and make judgements	Bank marketing	Service experience influences customers' expectation outcomes
	Ali <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Service experience is directly correlated with the level of customer satisfaction experienced	Theme parks industry in Malaysia	Service delivery levels directly impact customers' willingness to continue a relationship with a partner
	Loureiro <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Customer value perception is influenced by service engagement experience	Retail marketing	Customer satisfaction is directly influenced by the service engagement experience

and expectation-disconfirmation theories as important relationship-building philosophies through a service-focused approach.

As per [Table 1](#), the importance of professional service engagement with customers across industries can be noted. This engagement needs to be considered from internal and external organisational perspectives because of the nature of the service delivery process and the environment in which it is delivered. The two theories proposed are discussed below to analyse their relevance to further studies.

3.3 Relationship marketing theory

Relationship marketing theory originated over three decades ago, with a strong positioning of the concept in the field of B2B and services marketing ([Gummesson, 2017](#)). The theory is built on the premise that a long-term focus on relationship building can be beneficial to sellers and customers in a B2B environment ([Sarmiento et al., 2015](#)). Individuals' willingness to develop long-term relationships is more evident in a B2B environment, compared with a B2C environment, as the sales volumes in industrial markets make the building of such relationships more profitable in the long term ([Sheth et al., 2015](#)).

Relationship marketing promulgates a customer-orientated approach to service delivery ([Grönroos, 2017](#)) that is developed from an internal organisational culture focused on customer service ([Madu, 2018](#)). Therefore, a service-orientated organisational culture supports an all-inclusive approach towards customer management through an engaging, interactive style that drives customer service satisfaction, and ultimately customer retention ([Chumpitaz Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007](#); [Putra and Putri, 2019](#)). Through customer retention, the seller is enabled to increase sales volume and overall profitability ([Theron and Terblanche, 2010](#)).

3.4 Expectation-disconfirmation theory

In 1980, Oliver developed the expectation-disconfirmation theory to describe customers' behaviour after an engagement with a supplier ([Susanto et al., 2016](#)). The theory departs from the premise that customers have service expectations of suppliers before engagement is secured. Therefore, the suppliers' ability to deliver on such expectations will influence the customers' satisfaction experience ([Roldán Bravo et al., 2017](#)). This implies that customers incorporate their service expectations into their final evaluation of sellers' overall performance, which they judge through disconfirmation ([Wasan, 2018](#)).

Consequently, customers evaluate the sellers' ability to deliver a professional and engaging service experience on preconceived expectations that are compared to actual service performance levels ([Roldán Bravo et al., 2017](#), p. 435). To deliver positive disconfirmation to customers, sellers need to secure the delivery of value to customers that is built on high levels of service delivery quality, employee competence and integrity ([Loureiro et al., 2014](#)). Through this approach, sellers can strengthen customers' willingness to develop long-term relationships with them ([Negi and Ketema, 2010](#)), especially when sellers display a willingness to offer personalised services perceived as innovative and flexible ([Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017](#)).

In recent years, a school of thought has emerged emphasising the importance of leadership in developing an organisational service orientation towards industrial customers, thereby stimulating sales growth ([Hasaballah et al., 2014](#); [Verbeke et al., 2011](#)). One such leadership approach is transformational leadership ([Shannahan et al., 2013](#)), where employees are developed and motivated to engage with customers in a service-orientated manner ([Liao and Chuang, 2007](#)). This service-orientated approach positively stimulates sellers' professional engagement towards B2B customers, which drives a long-term willingness to continue the relationship in future ([Miroudot and Cadestin, 2017](#)).

Consequently, this study is built around two prominent theories – relationship marketing and expectation-disconfirmation – that encompass a service-orientated approach (see Table 1). Business research scholars (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2018; Shannahan *et al.*, 2013) argue that a transformational leadership style towards the management of employees is required to enhance sales performance.

As a philosophy, transformational leadership has the potential to direct employees towards organisational goals, such as improved service delivery, which can strengthen B2B customers' willingness to remain in relationships with sellers (Sharma *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, sellers need to develop a positive service orientation towards service delivery, which requires an engaging leadership approach, such as transformational leadership (Malhotra and Mukherjee, 2006). This leadership form embraces supervisory leadership as a management approach, as it is built on the principles of employee empowerment to help develop employees to become more interactive and engaging in their seller–customer interactions (Conradie *et al.*, 2014; Shannahan *et al.*, 2013).

Therefore, this study promulgates an understanding of the relationship marketing and expectation-disconfirmation theories as theoretical foundations for the building of long-term relationships with industrial customers through proficient service delivery. However, this understanding can only be positioned as a proposition in the services marketing domain if it embraces transformational leadership as an interactive leadership approach.

Employees understanding the importance of service engagement with external customers is vital to deliver on customer service expectations, which will influence sellers' sales performance in the long term (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2018). Considering this, the discussion below emphasises the relevance of transformational leadership as a supervisory leadership approach that stimulates employee engagement and commitment towards improved organisational service performance.

3.5 Transformational leadership approach

Transformational leadership focuses on commitment to organisational objectives, such as the empowerment of employees to deliver on customer service expectations (Jauhari *et al.*, 2017; Stone *et al.*, 2004). This leadership form empowers employees through training and development to align skills and ability with the sellers' overall customer service strategy (Arnold *et al.*, 2007; Weller *et al.*, 2020). Table 2 illustrates the importance of transformational leadership to long-term relationship building through an adapted employee-service-focused approach.

It can be noted from Table 2 that, for more than three decades, transformational leadership has focused on the motivation of employees through inspiration and engagement, driving supervisory leadership through a positive and supportive approach to achieve organisational objectives (Chua and Ayoko, 2021). Employees managed from a transformational leadership perspective develop trust and respect towards their managers, as they feel valued and respected (Barbutto, 2005). Hence, employees who are directly involved in the service delivery process to industrial customers show a greater intent to become service-orientated (Liaw *et al.*, 2010). This approach positively influences customers' service experiences, resulting in their willingness to remain in the relationship and stimulating overall sales volume (Nezami *et al.*, 2018).

4. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 illustrates this study's conceptual framework. It comprises organisational and environmental indicators of sales performance within a B2B seller context. The framework is founded on the seminal work of Verbeke *et al.* (2011), who suggested six dimensions of

Table 2.
The importance of transformational leadership in developing long-term relational orientation

Source	Key premise	Context	Importance to relationship building
Badrinarayanan et al. (2015)	Transformational leadership is engaging and inspirational, developing employee skills through empowerment (education and participation)	Personal selling and sales	Customer skills development is important to enhance long-term relationship orientation
Andiola (2014)	The development of a customer-engaging approach towards sales	Auditing environment	Customer engagement through a service focus positively influences sales
Shannahan et al. (2013)	Transformational leadership enhances sales performance through a skills development approach	Healthcare industry	Sales performance is enhanced through an interactive and engaging approach towards customer management
Huang et al. (2010)	The development of a positive work orientation towards organisational goals	Leadership and management approach	Intrinsic motivations are stimulated to enhance work performance
Thomas and Velthouse (1990)	The alignment of employee development towards organisational objectives	General management approach	Employee empowerment is aligned with engaging leadership, focused on people engagement
Kuhnert and Lewis (1987)	Transformational leadership is built acknowledgement that drives future engagement	Literature review of transactional versus transformational leadership	Supportive engagement between parties drives positive experiences and future commitment

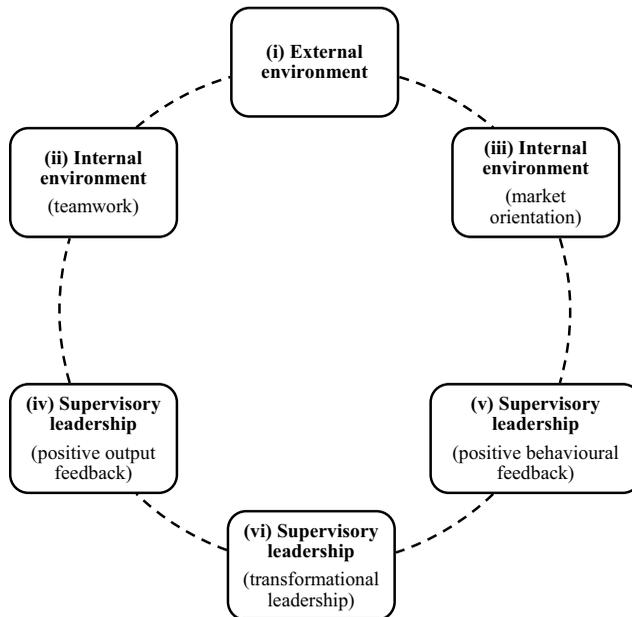


Figure 1.
Organisational and environmental indicators

sales performance. This study focuses on the organisational and environmental indicators, because they were acknowledged by Verbeke *et al.* (2011) as the leading drivers of sales performance. These indicators are:

- external environment – randomness (Johnson and Friend, 2015);
- internal environment – teamwork (Shannahan *et al.*, 2017);
- internal environment – market orientation (Han *et al.*, 1998);
- supervisory leadership – positive output feedback (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991);
- supervisory leadership – positive behavioural feedback (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991); and
- supervisory leadership – transformational leadership (Johnson and Friend, 2015).

By developing a greater understanding of these indicators (external environment, internal environment, supervisory leadership), sales managers can strengthen B2B buyers' experiences through professional service delivery that positively stimulates sales performance.

Against the background provided, this study's research objective is to assess a conceptual framework based on organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms. The framework is based on the conceptual results of the meta-analyses of sales performance indicators by Churchill *et al.* (1985) and Verbeke *et al.* (2011). This study contributes to services and sales management literature in B2B research by suggesting how organisational and environmental indicators influence business customers' experiences and sellers' overall sales and profitability. Therefore, Figure 1 promulgates that through an enhanced understanding of the different organisational and environmental indicators proposed, the management of the B2B buyers' service experiences can be improved, thereby increasing the sales performance of sellers in a B2B context.

5. Understanding organisational and environmental indicators of sales performance from a service perspective

The seminal work of Vargo and Lusch (2004) on service-dominant logic argued that organisations need to cultivate an understanding of the growing need for a service-orientated culture to stimulate competitive performance (sales performance). This understanding requires an internal and external focus on the factors driving organisational performance, specifically considering that sales competitiveness is being driven increasingly by a service-orientated approach developed internally to enhance external service experience (Rapp and Baker, 2017; Sundin *et al.*, 2000). Considering this, the different organisational and environmental indicators of sales performance require attention.

5.1 External environment

An organisation's external environment is exogenous to the firm, directly influencing its overall performance (Peter, 2020). Environmental conditions (e.g. increased competition, economic uncertainty, saturated market share) provide an increased emphasis on the management of customers through engaging service delivery efforts to sustain a competitive edge (Kuznetsova and Alekseeva, 2016).

Establishing a positive service delivery experience for the customers through helpful, friendly and engaging employees can strengthen the sellers' competitive position in an aggressive external environment (Chen *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, a service-engaging approach to the management of B2B customers can assist sellers in sustaining or improving their

sales performance capability in the market environment in which they operate (Pomirleanu *et al.*, 2016; Shannahan *et al.*, 2013).

5.2 *Internal environment*

5.2.1 *Market orientation.* Through a market-orientated approach, an organisation promotes service and product innovation by regularly gathering information from customers, competitors and suppliers (Baker and Sinkula, 1999). This information can be used to enhance overall competitiveness through organisational performance (Singh *et al.*, 2016). Such performance is built on a customer-centred approach that aligns the organisational vision with customer service and product needs, stimulating customer commitment to drive financial performance (Conduit and Mavondo, 2001; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Marjanovic and Murthy, 2016). When an organisation's internal market orientation is characterised by employee commitment to the overall vision, goals and service strategy of the organisation, greater success in delivering on external customer service expectations and achieving the level of satisfaction can be ensured (Gounaris, 2008; Malhotra and Mukherjee, 2006).

5.3 *Supervisory leadership*

5.3.1 *Positive behavioural feedback.* Feedback provided to employees should be interactive and developmental to empower employees to enhance their service engagement performance to customers (Helkkula *et al.*, 2018; Malhotra and Mukherjee, 2006). Tricomi and DePasque (2016) stated that employees who view feedback from superiors positively illustrate a greater willingness to enhance their service delivery performance. This is especially relevant to sales employees engaging directly with customers on sales-related issues. Employees' level of service performance becomes vital when addressing and managing customers' needs and expectations, as it directly influences sellers' ability to ensure long-term customer commitment and loyalty (Liao and Chuang, 2004).

In a competitive environment like sales, high levels of service engagement become a form of differentiation and require employees to provide warm and personal service delivery grounded in friendliness and helpfulness (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, positive behavioural feedback should stimulate the development of aspects like time management, the use of the most appropriate selling techniques and professional service engagement when dealing with industrial customers (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991; Tricomi and DePasque, 2016).

Through developmental feedback, employees are able to measure how successful they are in attaining business performance expectations (Kim *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, through a positive behavioural feedback approach, employees are empowered to enhance their overall service delivery ability to customers (Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016). Consequently, positive behavioural feedback is perceived as an enabler of individual employee performance levels (Laisasikorn and Rompho, 2014).

5.3.2 *Transformational leadership.* From a service context perspective, transformational leadership can communicate to employees the significance of delivering top-quality customer service and stimulate their keenness to serve customers in a friendly, helpful and engaging manner. Furthermore, transformational leadership can instil a willingness in employees to deliver high service quality to customers and motivate them to propose innovative ideas to enhance overall service delivery levels to customers. Moreover, it can empower employees to make suggestions on how to remove hindrances to providing high levels of service quality to customers in a B2B environment (Liao and Chuang, 2007; Purvanova *et al.*, 2006; Su *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, transformational leadership is perceived as

an innovative leadership approach to align employee ability with the overall organisational strategy (Buble *et al.*, 2014).

In leadership and psychology literature, coaching has been identified as an innovative form of transformational leadership. Sales coaching helps individuals to develop and enhance their overall sales performance through innovative customer service delivery skills (Hawkins *et al.*, 2015; Verbeke *et al.*, 2011).

Through the application of coaching as a training and developmental technique, sales managers can enhance individual sales performance by changing individual employee attitudes towards service delivery (Khandelwal Das *et al.*, 2014; Liao and Chuang, 2004). By developing a greater understanding of customers' service expectations, sales employees can be coached on how to better understand and manage these expectations, thereby driving increased customer intention to build a long-term relationship with the sellers (Badrinarayanan *et al.*, 2015; Shannahan *et al.*, 2013).

5.3.3 Positive output feedback. Scholars (Chonko *et al.*, 1986; Futrell *et al.*, 1976) have argued that managers' positive feedback can be perceived as a coaching tool for sales employees to improve their overall levels of productivity and task performance. This is especially true when the expectation is that employee customer service performance levels should be aligned with the organisation's service strategy (Hawkins *et al.*, 2015).

Sales employees will illustrate a greater intent to improve their service delivery ability to customers if their feedback is positive and developmental (Churchill *et al.*, 1976; Jaworski and Kohli, 1991). Conclusively, it becomes evident that services are considered an engaging, co-operative and vibrant process (Keränen and Prior, 2020), required to ensure customer satisfaction and provide a competitive advantage to sellers in a competitive market environment (Khan *et al.*, 2012).

5.3.4 Teamwork. Teamwork directly influences the quality of deliverables and encompasses effective communication, the establishment of trust and engaging leadership to ensure its success (Logan, 2016). Scholars agree that teamwork enhances competencies and ensures greater ability to deliver customer expectations (Salas and Rosen, 2013). However, a team's ability to work cohesively and deliver customer expectations depend on each member's level of experience working in a group and the leadership style applied to manage the group (Bélanger *et al.*, 2003; Itani *et al.*, 2019).

As a result, Friedrich *et al.* (2016) argued that teamwork should be managed as a pillar for workforce innovation, whereby employees can develop creative improvements in service delivery experiences to stimulate customer satisfaction. An engaging leadership approach towards team management also supports innovative service development and implementation, which stimulates seller engagement with customers and ensures enhanced levels of service satisfaction experience (Shokouhyar *et al.*, 2020).

6. Methodology

6.1 Dimensions and items

This study is limited to the organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms that Churchill *et al.* (1985) and Verbeke *et al.* (2011) reported in their meta-analyses. The following multi-item measures of each dimension were borrowed and modified:

- external environment – randomness (Johnson and Friend, 2015);
- internal environment – teamwork (Shannahan *et al.*, 2017);
- internal environment – market orientation (Han *et al.*, 1998);
- supervisory leadership – positive output feedback (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991);

- supervisory leadership – positive behavioural feedback (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991); and
- supervisory leadership – transformational leadership (Johnson and Friend, 2015).

Each item was measured using five-point Likert-type scales, with the anchor points “strongly agree” (5) and “strongly disagree” (1). The questionnaire items are displayed as follows:

- (1) External environment (randomness):
 - My life is controlled by accidental happenings.
 - When I get what I want, it is usually because I am lucky.
 - I feel like what happens in my life is controlled by random happenings.
- (2) Internal environment (teamwork):
 - I work closely with non-sales employees to close sales.
 - I coordinate closely with other company employees to handle post-sales service.
 - I discuss selling strategies with people from various departments.
- (3) Internal environment (marketing orientation):
 - We respond rapidly to competitive actions.
 - Information about customers is communicated throughout our organisation.
 - We frequently measure customer satisfaction.
- (4) Supervisory leadership (positive output feedback):
 - My manager provides me with positive feedback when my performance is good.
 - My manager lets me know when I produce good results.
 - My manager comments on my sales output when he is satisfied.
- (5) Supervisory leadership (positive behavioural feedback):
 - My manager makes a point of telling me when I manage my time well.
 - My manager commends me when I use the “right” selling techniques.
 - My manager tells me when I deal with customers appropriately.
- (6) Supervisory leadership (transformational leadership):
 - My supervisor cares about my opinions.
 - My supervisor cares about my well-being.
 - My supervisor shows concern for me.

6.2 Sample and context

The methodology is based on a questionnaire survey with a deductive approach. Ethical clearance was provided for the study by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (www.nsd.no) under ethical clearance number 605489 on 22 March 2019. A total of 732 companies were selected to partake in the study, representing different industries and corporate sizes of services firms in Norway. The services firms were identified based on the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC 2007).

A questionnaire accompanied by a letter of introduction, containing the contact details of the research team, was sent to the key informants. The key informants targeted were sellers, team leaders, sales managers, key account managers and regional managers. For key informants to be included in the study, they had to comply with two main criteria:

- The salesperson had a budget responsibility and was measured against this budget.
- The salesperson's main responsibility was to be actively involved in selling, not managing others to sell.

The researchers talked to sales directors and identified companies willing to contribute to the study. Key informants were asked to collaborate in the study and email reminders were sent or telephone calls were made encouraging them to complete the questionnaire if they had not done so within seven days of the initial request. This procedure was repeated two and three weeks after the initial request if the questionnaires had still not been returned. A total of 389 out of 732 questionnaires were returned, generating a response rate of 53.1%.

Two items at the end of the questionnaire on organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms considered the key informants' competence and experience as follows:

- total years of sales experience of key informants; and
- total years of sales experience of key informants in the current company.

[Campbell \(1955\)](#) advised to gather information about the key informants' relevant experience and competence in relation to the topic of the survey. The outcome of these items shows key informants' total sales experience with a mean value 20.4 years and a median of 20 years; and total sales experience in the current company with a mean value of 10.9 years and a median of eight years. The next section reports the univariate and multivariate statistics of the organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms.

7. Results

7.1 Sample characteristics

The filled-in and returned questionnaires from the sales executives represent a mix of Norwegian services-orientated companies operative in B2B settings. The industry of the companies, the size of their full-time employee equivalent and their annual turnover are reported in [Table 3](#).

The background statistics relating to the key informants can be argued broadly as follows:

Nature of business	Full-time employee		Annual		Count
	Count	equivalent	Count	turnover (€)	
Wholesale and retail trade	63	1–9	11	0–9.9 million	19
Transport and storage	39	10–19	10	10–49.9 million	31
Accommodation and food service	20	20–49	12	50–99.9 million	38
Information and communication	47	50–99	21	100–249 million	126
Financial and insurance	103	100–249	77	250+ million	175
Real estate	2	250–999	96	Total	389
Professional, scientific and technical activities	54	1,000+	162		
Administrative and support service	45	Total	389		
Other services	16				
Total	389				

Table 3.
Sample characteristics of service-oriented companies

- sales budget performance – 106%;
- age – 44 years;
- total sales experience – 17 years; sales experience in current company – 10 years;
- gender – 69% men and 31% women;
- share of respondents with commission/bonus-based salary – 84%; and
- share of salary from commission/bonus – 26%.

Their education levels are: 106 key informants have a pre-university level (27.2%); 250 have a university level (64.5%); and 33 have a polytechnic level (8.3%). The key informants' positions in the studied companies are:

- 152 salespeople (39.1%);
- 94 sales managers (24.2%);
- 92 key account managers (23.6%);
- three sales project managers (0.8%);
- nine regional managers (2.3%); and
- 39 others (10%).

The univariate statistics of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms in [Table 4](#) show almost any internal non-response bias across items. Moreover, [Table 4](#) shows mean values and standard deviations for all items grouped in line with the dimensions of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms.

7.2 Factor analysis criteria

The conceptual framework of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance from meta-analyses ([Churchill et al., 1985](#); [Verbeke et al., 2011](#)), which is

Table 4.
Organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms – univariate statistics

Dimension	Item	N	Mean	SD
External environment (randomness)	a)	389	2.23	0.96
	b)	389	1.76	0.81
	c)	389	1.83	0.91
Internal environment (teamwork)	a)	388	3.77	1.02
	b)	387	3.87	1
	c)	387	3.77	1
Internal environment (market orientation)	a)	388	3.34	1.17
	b)	387	3.09	1.12
	c)	387	3.44	1.14
Supervisory leadership (positive output feedback)	a)	389	4.21	0.86
	b)	389	4.15	0.86
	c)	389	4.09	0.91
Supervisory leadership (positive behavioural feedback)	a)	389	3.54	1.04
	b)	389	3.60	1.02
	c)	389	3.90	0.95
Supervisory leadership (transformational leadership)	a)	389	4.22	0.84
	b)	389	4.29	0.84
	c)	389	4.15	0.93

applied in this study on services firms, is verified through exploratory factor analysis (Norusis, 1993, 1994). The initial factor analysis is based on six dimensions and three items per dimension (18 items). Furthermore, the principal component method is used to verify the measurement properties of the dimensions, and an orthogonal approach (varimax rotation) is used to rotate the factor solution. One item is omitted, namely item "a" belonging to the dimension of internal environment (market orientation). Consequently, the refined factor analysis consists of 17 items across six dimensions, as shown in Table 5.

7.3 Factor solution statistics

Table 5 shows that the factor solution of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms is acceptable (Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin/overall measures of sampling adequacy [MSA]: 0.835; Bartlett's test: approx. chi-square: 2787.506; df: 153; Sig: 0.000). The MSA ranges between 0.60 and 0.92. Communalities span between 0.70 and 0.89, with a total explained variance of 78.4%. Consequently, the six-dimensional framework reported in Table 5 supports satisfactory validity. The Cronbach's alphas for the five factors span between 0.66 and 0.91. Therefore, the six-dimensional framework also supports satisfactory reliability.

The results of the refined factor solution in Table 5 show that the conceptual framework of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms by Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011) provide empirical evidence of acceptable convergent, discriminant and nomological validity, and reliability of each dimension.

Dimension and item	Factor(s)						*	**	
	1	2	3	4	5	6			
Supervisory leadership (transformational leadership)	a)	0.858	0.206	0.089	-0.081	0.175	0.073	0.829	0.893
	b)	0.838	0.226	0.088	0.002	0.250	0.084	0.830	0.884
	c)	0.838	0.222	0.133	-0.020	0.195	0.009	0.807	0.918
Supervisory leadership (positive behavioural feedback)	b)	0.204	0.883	0.102	0.056	0.145	0.101	0.867	0.829
	a)	0.234	0.818	0.035	-0.061	0.214	0.075	0.780	0.882
	c)	0.330	0.739	0.081	0.035	0.306	0.092	0.765	0.922
Internal environment (teamwork)	b)	0.186	0.109	0.846	-0.007	-0.034	0.017	0.764	0.760
	a)	0.106	-0.031	0.846	0.004	-0.015	0.105	0.739	0.714
	c)	-0.026	0.114	0.799	-0.092	0.201	-0.025	0.701	0.786
External environment (randomness)	c)	-0.057	-0.032	-0.055	0.895	-0.012	-0.032	0.809	0.602
	a)	-0.118	-0.044	0.048	0.812	0.207	0.008	0.721	0.644
	b)	0.106	0.099	-0.093	0.769	-0.281	-0.032	0.700	0.678
Supervisory leadership (positive output feedback)	a)	0.447	0.360	0.069	-0.038	0.719	0.104	0.863	0.868
	b)	0.448	0.407	0.072	-0.030	0.711	0.090	0.886	0.864
	c)	0.426	0.345	0.097	-0.003	0.642	0.136	0.740	0.959
Internal environment (market orientation)	c)	0.126	-0.048	0.002	-0.007	0.155	0.878	0.813	0.742
	b)	0.002	0.404	0.112	-0.055	-0.011	0.737	0.722	0.823
*** (%)	178	16.2	12.7	12.2	11.3	8.2			
**** (%)	17.8	34.0	46.7	59.0	70.2	78.4			
*****	0.90	0.88	0.79	0.77	0.91	0.66			

Table 5. Organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms – factor solution

Notes: *Communality per item; **MSA per item; ***total explained variance per factor; ****cumulative explained total variance; *****Cronbach's alpha

8. Discussion of results

More than a decade ago, [Zalocco et al. \(2009\)](#) promulgated the need to better understand the factors influencing overall business performance in a B2B setting. [Heirati and Siahtiri \(2019\)](#) supported this argument, stating that increased competitiveness in the B2B domain negates an enhanced understanding of the importance of service delivery as a differentiating factor in B2B relationship building. As promulgated by [Verbeke et al. \(2011\)](#), future business performance will be guided by a deeper understanding of the organisational and environmental factors driving business performance in a competitive setting, but that such an understanding will be required from multiple perspectives. As a result, the validation of the six-dimensional framework of organisational and environmental performance indicators validates a more comprehensive understanding of the external and internal factors (market orientation, positive behavioural feedback, transformational leadership, positive output feedback, and teamwork) driving future business performance.

The external environment of a seller business is controlled by accidental happenings, requiring a greater awareness of customer needs to address business customer expectations more successfully ([Aziz and Yassin, 2010](#)). Therefore, the empirical results of the study postulate that an understanding of business customers' service needs can strengthen seller-customer relationships, enabling the seller to address competitor actions with greater success. Furthermore, in terms of teamwork, a co-creation approach towards service delivery is critical when selling to business customers. [Hübner et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Rodríguez et al. \(2018\)](#) concurred, stating that in a competitive B2B market environment, the seller's service delivery ability increasingly influences the business customer's willingness to continue in a relationship with the seller, particularly if the customer's service expectations are satisfied. As a result, this study argues that it becomes imperative for sellers to develop internal strategies that align its internal service delivery ability to external customer expectations, thereby securing a service engagement approach that drives future relational intention.

The proposed model further infers that a transformational leadership approach to the management of employees can influence service delivery levels positively. The reason for this is that employees feel recognised, as co-creation towards a common goal (e.g. enhanced service delivery levels to business customers) can strengthen satisfaction levels and drive future relational intent. Moreover, a co-creative leadership approach to sales performance management can empower employees with a feeling of purpose towards the seller, supporting a service culture founded on service engagement and service success ([Zolkiewski et al., 2017](#)). As a result, the seller organisation requires an internal focus on employee management through a co-creative leadership approach that is transformational and developmental in nature. Therefore, stimulating employee interest in service excellence towards business customers can drive future business customer satisfaction and a desire to continue the relationship with the seller.

9. Research implications

The results provide empirical evidence that the conceptual frameworks of [Churchill et al. \(1985\)](#) and [Verbeke et al. \(2011\)](#) regarding organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms are valid and reliable, based on the following dimensions:

- external environment – randomness ([Johnson and Friend, 2015](#));
- internal environment – teamwork ([Shannahan et al., 2017](#));
- internal environment – market orientation ([Han et al., 1998](#));

- supervisory leadership – positive output feedback (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991);
- supervisory leadership – positive behavioural feedback (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991); and
- supervisory leadership – transformational leadership (Johnson and Friend, 2015).

Theoretically, the organisational and environmental indicators of the six-dimensional framework offer a foundation to assess the outcome of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms. For example, to what extent do the internal and external environments of services firms influence B2B sellers' sales performance. Undoubtedly, the environment has an impact, but the six-dimensional framework allows the impact on B2B sellers' sales performance to be tested. Furthermore, it is assumed that the leadership of service organisations impacts the outcome of firms. As a result, the six-dimensional framework provides a foundation to assess to what degree leadership actually influences B2B sellers' sales performance.

The six-dimensional framework also provides a basis to assess its interconnections and interrelationships with other indicators of sales performance, such as B2B service sellers' skills, aptitude, motivation and role perception, conceptualised by Churchill *et al.* (1985) and Verbeke *et al.* (2011). There are multiple research opportunities to explore new terrains to gain further knowledge and insight. In fact, the six-dimensional framework may enhance the understanding of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms.

Consequently, the results reported that organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms offer several options for further studies. The verified six-dimensional framework is relevant for assessing B2B sellers' objective and subjective performance in services firms, as well as their economic and non-economic satisfaction.

10. Managerial implications

The interactions between sellers and buyers in B2B settings make each services sales process unique, as it is often adapted and customised to individual customers. Additionally, B2B service sales are, to a large extent, conditioned by the influence of external factors in the process compared with the B2B product ones.

B2B sellers in services firms are more exposed to situations of the surrounding environment that could interfere negatively with B2B sellers' core self-evaluation (Johnson and Friend, 2015). This may cause B2B sellers to think that the control of what is going on is poor or lost because of the external environment. Therefore, services firms need to work with their B2B sellers on their core self-evaluation. This aspect is fundamental in the training of B2B sellers.

When services firms offer service solutions, B2B sellers are not the only face of the services firms, as technicians or IT staff who are visible and participate in the services sales are also seen as the face of the services firms. Consequently, services firms need to create teams to manage the internal environment integrating the B2B sellers' profile with other staff. It becomes imperative to align staff who face potential and existing customers.

Globalisation and competitive markets require services firms developing their internal environment to be market-orientated. Services firms need to be proactive to effectively address and adapt to market changes. Technology systems, such as enterprise resource planning, may help services firms organise and structure the market information, while sales force automation can keep the information that the B2B sellers need to facilitate the services sales process. The undertaken supervisory leadership of B2B sellers affects their performance and satisfaction (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991). In services sales, it is even more

important than in product sales that the B2B sellers have enough confidence in the supervisory leadership to share the market information and planning joint strategies (transformational leadership).

Supervisory leadership needs to be mutual, but it is the sales managers' responsibility to encourage and congratulate their B2B sellers for doing well in relation to achieved results (positive output feedback) or performed behaviour (positive behavioural feedback). Moreover, supervisory leadership has to be done appropriately, in a constructive way, when unexpected things happen.

Furthermore, it is important to build an internal environment based on a market-orientated culture. Clear guidelines from top management on the most appropriate working culture as well as the type of training required by the sales organisation are essential elements. A more market-orientated sales organisation may contribute to earlier adaption of market changes and better relationships with customers. The external environment also becomes relevant in recruiting processes, because searching for people who believe they can influence people, happenings and situations outside of organisations is important.

Supervisory leadership (i.e. transformational leadership) is relevant for sales managers through managing by including sellers in decision-making and to motivate the sellers based on common goals and visions. Supervisory leadership (i.e. positive output feedback and positive behavioural feedback) is also relevant for sales management focusing on the provision of feedback on how an individual performs a task and the results achieved. To a large extent, many sales managers focus on results alone.

The B2B sales environment is competitive, not only among sellers in different services firms, but also between B2B sellers of the same sales team. Because of tough competition in services markets, firms need to evolve to get the best out of their sellers and sales team. In addition, sales managers can develop internal competitions between members of the sales team within the seller firm. The primary purpose of such competitions could be to stimulate learning between sellers, as peers can assist each other in the development of negotiation skills and time optimisation.

The B2B seller is the image of the firm in the services market. Furthermore, the B2B seller personality profile is usually creative. The B2B seller may impact the environment using current options of technology, such as social media, customer relationship management solutions and digital communications. The sales leadership needs to plan appropriate training of B2B service sellers in technological tools and align the strategy of the firm with B2B seller actions to address sellers' creativity to achieve the sales goals of the firm.

Consequently, many areas of B2B service sales are affected by environmental and organisational indicators that may impact B2B sellers' sales performance. Hence, the six-dimensional framework of environmental and organisational indicators offers areas of relevance to manage B2B sellers in services markets.

11. Conclusions and suggestions for further studies

This study's results contribute to existing theory and previous research in different ways. It empirically verifies a conceptual framework (Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Verbeke *et al.*, 2011) of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms. Moreover, the study's results contribute to verifying the relevance of several dimensions of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms – namely, external environment (randomness), internal environment (teamwork, market orientation) and supervisory leadership (positive output feedback, positive behavioural feedback, transformational leadership).

The six-dimensional framework reported offers a foundation to broaden and deepen the understanding of environmental and organisational indicators on the outcome of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms. It also provides opportunities to further explore the interconnections and interrelationships with other indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance. The organisational and environmental indicators in services firms may contextualise other indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance, such as skills, motivations, aptitude and role perception.

The internal and external environmental indicators contribute to opening up a window to link B2B sellers' sales performance to the outcome of leadership indicators, and vice versa. Leadership needs to support B2B sellers with environmental understanding and organisational guidance. The framework of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance in services firms demonstrates acceptable validity and reliability. Nevertheless, the results contain limitations, which provide opportunities for additional research. Future studies may focus on a sample that is not based on services firms, such as product-orientated companies, to verify the relevance in another B2B setting. Evidently, the framework of organisational and environmental indicators of B2B sellers' sales performance requires further testing of validity and reliability in different or similar countries and non-Western B2B settings in other continents. Furthermore, scholars can investigate how the organisational and environmental areas explored in this study relate to each other and to seller performance.

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