

Grzegorz LESZCZYŃSKI\*  
Marek ZIELIŃSKI  
Poznań University of Economics

## The impact of misaligned business communication on the quality of salesperson – buyer relationships

**Abstract:** Despite the important role of communication in the business-to-business sphere, little attention is given to it in publications. Research conducted so far focused on the level and scope of information exchange or marketing in general. However, an explanation to what degree communication, particularly taking into account buyer needs in communication, has an effect on buyer-salesperson relationships is absent. Therefore, this paper is based on the thesis that salesperson communication, at variance with buyer expectations, leads to deterioration of buyer's trust, satisfaction, commitment and willingness to recommend the salesperson.

The paper defines elements of communication indispensable in maintaining relationships with specific parameters (trust, satisfaction, commitment and recommendation). It also indicates that the extent to which not adapting communication has an effect on the buyer-salesperson relationship does not depend on trust which buyers have in salespersons, compared to other sources of information.

The effect of the paper is to indicate the areas of communication towards which a salesperson should direct their efforts and such areas, which, even if lacking conformity, do not have a negative effect on buyer-salesperson relationships.

**Keywords:** communication behavior, interaction, adaptive selling, relationship effects, professional buyers behavior.

**JEL codes:** D83, M30.

### Introduction

Loyalty of the business customer is based not only on product features but also on convergence of personal and social forces that exist between professional buy-

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\* Corresponding author. Email: g.leszczynski@ue.poznan.pl.

ers and key contact personnel within supplier firms [Oliver 1999]. The role of key contact personnel in satisfying customers in the business market is important [Bendapudi & Leone 2002; Homburg & Stock 2004]. Furthermore, it has been shown that well-functioning buyer–salesperson relationships improve the financial as well as non-financial performance of both buyers and salespersons [O’Toole & Donaldson 2002].

Personal selling is – by nature – a personal communication that seeks to inform buyers about products in an exchange situation [Agnihotri et al. 2009] and relations and networks between enterprises are essentially formed through interpersonal communication [Olkkonen et al. 2000]. In the opinion of many authors communication is of key significance in the relationship process between buyers and salespersons. It can be perceived as the main element of the relationship [Guenzi et al. 2007]. Communication processes underline most aspects of organizational interaction and, therefore, are typically viewed as being critical to organizational success. Communication is treated as the essence of coordinating organisation behaviours and is defined as the “glue” holding together co-operating enterprises [Mohr & Nevin 1990]. The role of communication is so significant that it has been proposed to treat it as the basic index of a relationship lifespan [Mohr & Spekman 1994].

The paper is based on the thesis that communication may be one of the elements that shape buyer-salesperson relations. In general, research results indicate that there is a link between buyer-salesperson relations and their mutual communication [Webster & Sundaram 2009]. Based on the work of Oliver [1980], we assume that the chance of positive evaluation of communication with the salesperson by the buyer is related to their pre-interaction expectations that create a frame of reference from which a buyer makes post-interaction comparative judgments. When a judgment leads to a worse-than buyer’s frame of reference comparison than dissatisfaction likely occurs [Lewin 2009]. The paper is intended to show how a misalignment between a buyer’s expectations and a salesperson’s communication performance impacts their relations.

This issue is important due to the fact that customer (dis)satisfaction influences an organization’s current and future performance [Anderson et al. 1994], as it is an important source of competitive advantage [Lemon et al. 2000]. This study responds to the call for more research examining salespeople service behaviours required to satisfy business customers. In contrast to the more frequently adopted approach which is about getting to know the effects of salesperson activities, it has been decided to determine the effects of activities undertaken, which do not meet customer expectations. The paper further makes reference to studies conducted in the framework of interaction/network theory through focusing on communication, information source uncertainty and relationship characteristics, which are often identified as elements of this approach [Johanson & Mattsson 1987; Möller & Halinen 2000; Claycomb & Frankwick 2010]. The paper becomes part of this line

of research by developing and testing the influence of failing to meet buyer expectations towards salesperson communication on their relations, and enriches existing literature through studying the outcome of failure in the communication process on the basis of survey data collected from purchasing professionals. The paper concerns the food industry, which was selected for two reasons. It is one of the biggest industries in Poland and the European Union. Further relationships are very important in the food industry as they “secure” cooperation while the conditions are unpredictable due to changeable weather conditions. This industry also was chosen because of previous studies that showed a positive effect of communication on the business-to-business relations [Bavorova et al. 2006].

We indicate that mismatching expectations has an effect on relationship quality, but the scope of this effect depends on the buyer’s attitude to the salesperson as a source of information. Conclusions from the paper may be important for sales managers and salespeople alike, as they should be aware of the impact of communication incompatible with customer expectations.

The issue of buyer-salesperson relations has been given quite a lot of attention in the literature according to an established conviction that the buyer-salesperson relationship is an important resource serving to create a competitive edge on both sides [Claycomb & Frankwick 2010]. Concurrently, few empirical studies have specifically focused on communication between these sides and its effect on mutual relations [Gurau 2008; Claycomb & Frankwick 2010]. Usually it is treated as the environment in which interactions take place or communication from the perspective of the company and not the people who establish the relations [Williams et al. 1990]. Little attention has been devoted to research on the question of adaptation in the field of communication in business-to-business relations and the impact of communication style on customer attitudes [Webster & Sundaram 2009]. The few studies conducted so far on adapting communication focused on the level and scope of information exchange [Holmlund & Kock 1995; Brennan et al. 2003], relations development [Claycomb & Frankwick 2010] or marketing in general [Achrol et al. 2000].

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section the theoretical framework for the current study is established. The essentials of communication and its impact on relationship quality are discussed and hypotheses are offered. It was necessary to conduct empirical studies in two stages. The first was aimed at determining the needs of buyers in the field of communication with the salesperson. Operationalization of communication was the outcome of the first study and was used to prepare a scale to verify the adopted hypotheses in the second research. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings, including implications for further research.

# 1. Conceptual background

## 1.1. *Communication*

Broadly, communication comprises all forms of contact, including written and verbal communication, and interaction [Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000], whereas Anderson and Narus [1990] see communication as the sharing of meaningful information between two firms, whether formal or informal. The term “communication” is ambiguous. As early as in 1970 Dance collected 95 definitions of communication and concluded that none of them embraces all approaches to communication [Dance 1970]. The foundations for the contemporary approach to communication lie in studies conducted between 1940–1965 when communication models deeply rooted in marketing were created: the persuasive act model and the mathematical model. Their focus is on who communicates what to whom and how, thus they exhibit a rather instrumental approach to communication. These concepts had a lasting effect on subsequent works on communication; therefore in the literature communication is often presented as transmitting information from one locatoin to another.

In the paper a functional approach to communication is adopted, concerned with determining the impact of communication on an enterprise, particularly on organising and developing relationships as well as facilitating exchange [Shockley-Zalabak 1993].

The means of communication is particularly important in the development and maintenance of long-term relationships between partners. Communication is therefore defined as the content and means of information exchange between partnering firms [Bantham 2010]. The existence of relations between two organisations means that they have established a channel of communication, built around personal relationships of the employees, mutual exchange standards, electronic exchange of data or integrating production management systems [Evans & Wurster 1997]. Communication is often regarded in the context of processes of exchange or forming relations between enterprises, but this issue would also need to be regarded at the level interpersonal relations [Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000]. Analysing communication at such a level facilitates understanding the relationship between enterprises [Wren & Simpson 1996]. Communication between salesperson and buyer forms a mutual relationship [Dwyer, Shurr & Oh 1987]. Together with the relationship structure communication creates an environment for interactions between both parties [Wren & Simpson 1996].

Bantham [2010] suggests that communication is a complex category consisting of numerous, multi-dimensional attributes. In marketing literature, the communication construct is defined using information content [Mohr & Nevin 1990], amount, frequency, quality [Palmatier et al. 2006], accuracy, timeliness and adequacy of ex-

changed information [Mohr & Spekman 1994], as well as the way information is exchanged. In accordance with the functional approach to communication its content is worth exploring from the point of view of communication participants' aims. For the buyer it is important to receive important information (satisfying information needs), from a personal or impersonal source [Moriarty & Spekman 1984] that is credible [Sweitzer 1976] and delivered on time [Anderson & Narus 1990].

The form of the exchange, sometimes referred to as style, is defined by direction, frequency, medium and exerting influence [Wren & Simpson 1996; Mohr & Nevin 1990]. Communication may be one- or two-way. The first is described by the classic communication models – the transmitter is active in providing information, and the receiver passively takes it in. Such an approach to communication as a monologue was adopted in transactional marketing. Two-way communication based on a dialogue was emphasised in relationship marketing [Andersen 2001; Grönroos 2004]. Frequency of communication influences the amount of transmitted information. In every relationship there is a minimal frequency of communication indispensable to maintain it, and a borderline frequency, on the other hand, exceeding which has a negative effect on the relationship. The medium plays a vital role in communication, and taking into consideration the direct nature of business-to-business relations it can be direct or indirect [Mohr & Nevin 1990]. Communication can be informational in character, when the aim is to reach understanding between the process participants. In the case of persuasive communication, its fundamental characteristic is such an influence of the transmitter on the receiver to urge them to voluntarily accept and adopt new behaviours and attitudes according to the transmitter's intention [O'Donnell & Kable 1982].

## ***1.2. Buyer's expectations towards communication***

An expectation is a belief maintained by someone that something might happen in the foreseeable future [Andersen et al. 2009]. Expectations are the most important antecedents of satisfaction [Fornell et al. 1996; Oliver 1980; Zeithaml 1988], as the achievable level of satisfaction is dependent on the level of expectations.

Some evidence suggests that satisfaction should not be treated as a unidimensional construct and that it has two coexisting dimensions, satisfaction and dissatisfaction for the same individual experience. Both dimensions can be researched autonomously [Mackoy & Spreng 1995].

In business-to-business relations the link between expectations and satisfaction is stronger than on the consumer market since individual buying decisions have a direct influence on the supplier's condition [Cronin & Morris 1989]. Professional buyers devote more time and effort to determining the needs, and analyse and evaluate offers, which in turn affects their developing expectations. It is assumed that such purchases are more conscious than in the case of consumption product purchases.

Buyer expectations are not constant and undergo changes as a result of previous contacts with the salesperson, with other information sources and due to recommendation [Anderson et al. 1994; Fornell et al. 1996]. As a consequence of the experiences norms are formed which shape and determine the level of buyer expectations. Research indicates that buyer expectations of the salesperson at the beginning of the relationship are relatively high, not only with reference to the product, but also the service process [Lewin 2009]. This also means high expectations on the quality of communication with the salesperson [Claycomb & Frankwick 2010].

In terms of communication, expectations are about how the partner will be communicating [Meyer et al. 1985], but also that they will accept set norms. Andersen et al. [2009] on the basis of an overview of research claim that in buyer-salesperson relations expectations are concerned with understanding the other party. In the field of communication one may therefore expect that factual buyer expectations are linked to their tasks in obtaining information. Buyers expect the salesperson to facilitate access to information, which is possible to structure and analyse and will then enable buyers to have control over the buying process (especially in new or complex buying situations) [Bunn 1993].

Determining buyer information needs is an important challenge for the supplier because obtaining good-quality information may positively affect the purchase decision [Petersen et al. 2005; Järvi & Munnuka 2010]. According to the integrated model of buying behaviours, buyers need information about: product' quality, price, delivery, service and the supplier' image [Bharadwaj 2004]. Based on the advantages expected by institutional buyers their information needs concern such areas as: products, services and relations, as well as costs to be incurred in order to gain advantages [Lapierre 2000]. Taking into consideration elements of the supplier' offer, it is information that makes it possible to evaluate the offer value, feasibility, availability and diversity and effectiveness of the service [Bennett 1997]. So far, however, it has not been empirically assessed how – according to the buyers – the supplier should provide the information.

In the context of incomplete information on the side of the buyer or salesperson, both parties develop their expectations of the partner's affective elements, such as assessment of their character [Andersen 2001] or the other person's features [Williams & Spiro 1985]. Attention is paid not only to the message, but also the communication style, which creates its context allowing for building trust and credibility, so the atmosphere conducive to co-operation [Hallen & Sandstrom 1991]. Expectations regarding the quality, frequency and scope of partners' communication efforts are therefore important.

### ***1.3. Misalignment between relationship parties***

The concepts of alignment and misalignment is intuitively appealing although these concepts are not consolidated and generally accepted approaches to them do not

exist [Corsaro & Snehota 2010]. Alignment and misalignment are described as fitting, similarity, unanimity, accordance or understanding. Benefits of similarity between buyer and salespersons refer to the development of long-term relationships, which is easier when there is a common perception of the cooperation [Anderson et al. 1994], as well as mutual communication [Kim et al. 2006]. In turn, perceiving and interpreting different the business context and the environment may cause limitations in communications and knowledge transfer [Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998].

Dissonance between parties is common in business relationships because of differences in goals, approaches and perceptions. Understanding the sources of dissimilarities between buyer and salesperson is important to the development of a relationship as those differences can cause difficulties and problems in it [Leminen 2001]. One source of misalignment may be failing to meet the expectations of a buyer by the seller, due to ignorance or misinterpretation of customer needs or inadequate solutions [Corsaro & Snehota 2010]. Therefore we focus on misalignment in communication because of its impact on business-to-business relations.

#### ***1.4. Impact of communication on relationship quality***

A number of scholars focus on the role of communication in relationship development. In business-to-business relations the main task of communication is ensuring partners understanding of intentions and capabilities and laying the foundations for relationship development. The quality of information and its exchange affects the success of the relationship [Mohr & Spekman 1994].

Communication cannot be brought down to only information transfer only. In the course of the communication process the transmitter presents their emotional attitude both to the transmitted information and the receiver. Thus, in the process of communication the relationship between the transmitter and receiver is constantly defined and redefined.

Communication has therefore an effect on the relationship itself and its development. Successful buyer-salesperson relationships involve firms which achieve a higher level of communication quality [Nunlee 2005]. More complex communication leads to better results, stronger bond and better atmosphere, which in turn contributes to relationship development [Biggemann & Buttle 2009]. The benefits of long-term relationships to the firm are increased loyalty [Dwyer et al. 1987] and satisfaction [Boles et al. 2001] among customers. Communication within a supplier-buyer relationship should be reflected in key relationship areas, such as raising the level of the enterprise recommendation to others or lowering the tendency to change the supplier [Bolton et al. 2000; Narayandas 1998].

The synthesis model of buyer-salesperson relationship model by Wren and Simpson emphasises the importance of communication not only as the background for buyer-salesperson interactions, but also as the factor influencing its outcome:



affective (co-operation, confidence, commitment, satisfaction) and behavioural (purchase levels, final profit) results [Wren & Simpson 1996]. On the other hand, in the IMP Group relationship model [Hakansson 1982] communication leads to satisfaction and trust.

To sum up the above ideas, one needs to point out two options of perceiving communication in buyer-salesperson relations. From a narrow perspective, communication effects in business relations may be attributed to the success of a specific transaction. From this point of view, the highest position in the hierarchy of effects of the enterprise's communication with the market is occupied by the purchase decision [Blythe 2005]. From a broader perspective, on the other hand, communication together with the processes of interacting and creating value are of primary importance for the success of relationship marketing [Grönroos 2004], because of their influence on trust [Mohr & Nevin 1990; Anderson & Narus 1990], satisfaction, willingness to recommend and commitment [Hakansson et al. 1976], and through these variables on the channel of distribution effects [Mohr & Nevin 1990]. In our analysis we have focused on linking communication with areas of affective relational effects presented in the later part of the paper: trust, satisfaction, commitment (affective and calculative), which are often mentioned as key elements determining the quality of business relationships [Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002].

#### *1.4.1. Trust (TR)*

A construct closely related to meeting expectations is trust. Trust may be treated as an emotional state to be interpreted in the context of such notions as "certainty" [Garbarino & Johnson 1999] or "expectation" [Gambetta 1988]. Trust comprises an element of credibility, which is a conviction that the other party will act in accordance with their promises [Iacobucci & Hibbard 1999]. It is also assumed that trust also concerns benevolence, which is a belief that the other party will take into consideration the interests of their co-operator [Wilson 1995].

Communication is positively related to trust [Anderson & Narus 1990; Anderson & Weitz 1992] and trust leads to an increase in communication intensity [Dwyer et al. 1987]. According to Kadefors et al. [2009] customers need to engage strategically in project communication in order to build trust. Also Das and Teng [1998] emphasise the role of communication in building confidence in partner co-operation.

Morgan and Hunt [1994] in their model assumed that communication, next to common values and non-opportunistic behaviour, is the determinant of trust. However, in order to translate itself into confidence it should meet certain conditions, e.g. be helpful and useful, available on time and mean minimal effort for the receiver.

#### *1.4.2. Satisfaction (SAT)*

Satisfaction is an emotional construct, through its determinants can be both emotional and cognitive in character [Bennett & Rundle-Thiele 2004]. Most often it is



assumed that customer satisfaction is a function of meeting expectations, and particularly an assessment of divergence between expectations (of brand, product) and the received value. Increasingly, customer satisfaction is viewed as a key determinant of organizational success. Customer satisfaction has been shown to positively influence repeat sales and/or repurchase intentions, and increase customer loyalty [Anderson et al. 1997; Homburg & Rudolph 2001]. Studies on the effect of satisfaction on customer behaviour showed the existence of its relation to, among other things, customer retention [Anderson & Sullivan 1993; Bolton 1998; Mittal & Kamakura 2001], share in purchase category [Bowman & Narayandas 2001; Keiningham et al. 2007] or willingness to recommend [Kwiatek & Białowas 2008].

Batta [2000] claims that in the food industry the provision of appropriate information and communication by, for example, the seed supplier increase the farmer's relationship satisfaction. Communication between seed suppliers and farmers increased the farmer's perceptions of being adequately rewarded.

#### *1.4.3. Commitment (COA, COC)*

For many authors it is commitment that reflects the quality of a dyad relationship [O'Reilly & Chatman 1986]. It is assumed that the prerequisite of commitment's existence is the fact that it comprises both affective (emotional commitment) and behavioural (continuation of cooperation) components [Allen & Meyer 1990]. The dyadic of commitment, as many authors indicate, translates into the existence of two kinds of commitment: affective, related to liking (COA) and calculative, related to willingness to retain the relationship and a sense of its profitability (COC) [Morgan & Hunt 1994; Fullerton 2003; Håvard et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2001]. Increasing relationship strength, i.e. companies becoming committed to each other and creating bonds, has been typically attributed to antecedents such as intensive communication [Holmlund-Rytönen & Strandvik 2003]. According to Botha et al., ensuring that information is communicated accordingly, should contribute to customer loyalty, which may yield repeat purchases and enhance firm performance [Botha et al. 2011].

### ***1.5. Confidence in the salesperson as the buyer differing factor***

Uncertainty is one of the key dimensions of buyer-salesperson interactions and effective communication with the salesperson is a factor lowering buyer's uncertainty [Duncan 1973] as it reduces the number of doubts concerning the given supplier. Previous experiences lead buyers to the assumption that communication with the salesperson is a promise of what co-operation with the company they represent will look like [Larson 1992]. Therefore, seeking information and analysing collected data is among the main activities of buyers [Bunn 1993]. Buyers treat the salesperson as the second-best (after the Internet) source of information in the buying decision process [Thomas et al. 2007] however; their role differs depending on the purchase

situation. When the purchasing risk seems low to the buyers they tend to rely on impersonal sources of information and treat them as sufficient because they are concerned with a smooth purchase [Kennedy & Deeter-Schmelz 2001; Gounaris 2005]. As uncertainty and risk increase so does the degree of effort put into searching for information, which is mainly reflected in the increase in the number of information sources [Robinson et al. 1976; Bunn 1994; Bienstock & Royne 2007] and a greater significance attributed to information from supplier representatives or other companies operating on the market [Kennedy & Deeter-Schmelz 2001; Bunn & Liu 1996; Woo & Ennew 2005; Rauyrueen & Miller 2006].

Differentiating between buyer behaviour depending on the situation, does not exhaust all factors which influence the buyer. In the same purchase situation buyer behaviour may differ as a result of other factors, including the source of information and buyer experiences [Sheth 1976]. Buyers seek information only to the point when costs of gaining information do not exceed the benefits it offers [Bienstock & Royne 2007]. The perception of these benefits and costs may be different depending on the buyer's earlier experiences of receiving information from salespersons. This is why one may suspect that the experiences and history of contacts with salespersons diversify the attitudes of buyers towards the salespersons as a source of information.

### ***1.6. Relationship in food industry***

Relationships develop in special circumstances in the food industry. Buyers' decisions are risky, because they have to be long-term oriented but the quality of products that are bought is often hard to verify. Therefore, purchasing decisions are dependent on the level of trust, especially when buying from a new supplier. Research on trust between firms in that market indicates that trust-based relationships affect the competitiveness because it allows the development of cooperation and to reduce transaction costs. In Europe small firms embedded in the local community dominate the food industry. Breeders, farmers, manufacturers and dealers generally know each other personally [Canavari et al. 2010]. They are too small to survive without relationships.

In Poland, the food industry is rapidly growing; there are many new companies, and thus new vendors. Industry has a high propensity for cooperation in the manufacturer-distributor relations and the relational approach outweighs the transactional. It is important to trust the partner, due to the high value of a single transaction in that market [Kwiatek et al. 2009].

## 2. Hypotheses

Communication is a plain of relations between buyers and salespersons. These relations may in turn provide the co-operating partners specific results, among which we have included: satisfaction, confidence, commitment and recommendation. Since in the literature one may find research results indicating that communication is an important factor affecting the development or strength of these effects, the main objective of this study is to investigate whether or not communication incompatible with what the buyer expects has an effect on their relations with the salesperson and how this varies among buyers with different levels of confidence in the salesperson as a source of information.

As research shows, companies operating on the institutional market find themselves in a constant process of adaptation, described in the literature as adaptive selling [Spiro & Weitz 1990]. It may occur in the offer as well as the service or management system processes [Brennan et al. 2003]. Adaptive activities may therefore take place on the level of the salesperson, when the scope of transmitted information and communication are adapted [Eckert 2006]. While research indicating a positive effect of communication according to buyer expectations on the relations has been undertaken, knowledge about the effects of activities incompatible with buyer expectations is scarce. Some evidence suggests that satisfaction should not be treated as a unidimensional construct and it is worth distinguishing between satisfaction and dissatisfaction [Mackoy & Spreng 1995]. Therefore we have adopted a more infrequently used through cognitively more interesting approach where we examine the impact of not meeting communication expectations on buyer-salesperson relations.

Besides aiming to empirically verify the main thesis about the impact of misaligned communication on buyer-salesperson relations one may also expect the varied impact of the misalignment on various elements of communication on the relations. So far research indicates that that the elements, which affect communication quality, are timeliness, suitable content [Mohr & Spekman 1994] as well as style [Webster & Sundaram 2009]. However, they do not describe the hierarchy of these elements. Based on the assumption about rationality of professional buyer behaviours one may expect a confirmation of the following hypotheses:

- H1. *Failing to meet buyer expectations on timeliness of communication has a greater effect on relationship quality (in area of satisfaction, trust, commitment) with the salesperson than other elements of communication.*
- H2. *Failing to meet buyer expectations on the object of communication has greater effect on relationship quality (satisfaction, trust, commitment) with the salesperson than not meeting expectations concerning the style of communication.*

Claycomb and Frankwick operationalize buyer's experience and previous contacts with the salesperson through supplier reputation described as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the

firm's overall appeal", which embraces "trust" and "concern for customers". The high reputation of the supplier has a positive effect on lowering uncertainty [Claycomb & Frankwick 2010]. In applying this approach to the level of buyer-salesperson relations we assume that the buyer's impression of the salesperson's reputation may moderate the effects of mutual communication. Thus buyers who have confidence in salespersons as a source of information should react less negative when communication mismatches their needs. At the same time, in the case of buyers who do not have confidence in the salesperson, incompatible communication may negatively affect the relations, due to their earlier negative experiences. In other words, among buyers having confidence in the salesperson the risk of deteriorating relations by inadequate communication may be lower than in the case of buyers who do not trust the salesperson. The H3 hypothesis has been formulated on the basis of the above analysis:

H3. *The impact of not meeting buyer's communication expectations on relationship quality (satisfaction, trust, commitment) with the salesperson is lower among buyers with greater confidence in the salesperson as a source of information.*

### **3. Research outline**

Research focused on the buyer's perspective on communication with the salesperson and its influence on mutual relations. To achieve the set aims it was necessary to collect empirical data during two studies, conducted on two independent samples:

- the first study was aimed at determining the needs of professional buyers communication with the salespersons. Designing such a study was necessary due to the lack of a coherent view presented in the literature on the elements of communication in buyer-seller relationships. The first study was conducted in 2008.
- the second study was aimed at verification of adopted hypotheses about the impact of misaligned communication on relationship quality. It was conducted in 2009. In the next two sections these studies are presented respectively.

## **4. Research on buyers expectations**

### ***4.1. Methodology***

In order to identify buyer expectations towards communication with the salesperson as far as the previously described elements of communication are concerned, a survey of professional buyers was developed. A structured questionnaire was used

for this purpose, which consisted of 7 questions on elements of communication, based on a 5-point semantic scale:

- communication on time/earlier or later,
- providing information expected by the buyer/also other information,
- availability of information only from the salesperson/from other sources,
- communication in the form of a monologue/dialogue,
- communication frequency: as often as desired by the buyer/less often or more often,
- personal/impersonal communication,
- persuasive/non-persuasive communication.

#### **4.2. Organisation**

Research was narrowed down to the food industry as it is rapidly developing in Poland. This is connected with governmental programmes of modernisation of agriculture and food processing, co-financed with the European Union resources. New companies and so new salespersons are appearing on the food market. To define the market context of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with salespersons and buyers operating in the food industry in Poland. They claim that the industry is characterised by a strong tendency to co-operate in producer-distributor relations, but there is scarce co-operation with companies that are at the same level in the value chain. In the industry the relational approach is more common than the transactional. The dominating form in the communication is the telephone and email. Personal contacts are not too frequent, but trade fairs are highly significant. In sales confidence plays an important role, which results from the high significance of a single transaction on the market. Recommendations are often used in the industry, but they must come from a credible source.

The main difficulty in the case of studying buyers was in reaching a large number of buyers while having limited resources. Due to the fact that purchase management is in the development stage in Poland, there is a lack of organisations associating buyers (there are no databases), as well as meetings (e.g. specialist conferences), in which buyers from various industries could participate. In such a situation it was decided to reach buyers during a significant trade fair which guarantees participation of a large number of buyers.

In Poland trade fairs play a vital role in company activities, they can be treated as an event during which representatives of all groups functioning within the given industry come together [Black 1986]. An argument for conducting research during a trade fair is the opportunity to embrace at the same time and place a great number of companies and people from the given industry [Leszczyński & Zieliński 2007].

With regard to the above-mentioned context, research on buyers was conducted at one of the biggest international trade fairs in Poland – Polagra. The choice of a big and prestigious trade fair guarantees the presence of the right number of buyers.

The study of communication expectations of buyers was conducted on the first day of the trade fair as it is devoted exclusively to industry professionals. Based on data on visitors to the selected exhibitions during the PolagraFood and PolagraTech 2008 trade fair, a minimal sample for one day's trade fair visitors was established at the level of 112 persons ( $p = 0.9$ ,  $\alpha = 95\%$ ,  $e = 5.5\%$ ).

Specially trained pollsters conducted the interviews. Research involved every 10<sup>th</sup> person registering as a buyer at the trade fair and was conducted on their entry to the fair. In total 129 correctly filled questionnaires were collected which qualified for further analysis.

### 4.3. Data analysis

First the demography of respondents was analysed. In the groups of buyers the majority were men (82.3%). They could be called experienced. Just under 35% were persons working in the profession for less than 5 years, and more than a quarter worked for 6–10 years. Longer work experience in purchasing (11–15 years) counted for 17.8% of respondents, and 20.9% had experience of more than 15 years.

Buyers' expectations towards communication were then calculated. Finally, a Varimax factor analysis was conducted. It showed three factors (Table 1) that explained more than 60% of observed phenomena (Table 2). This ratio is low, but acceptable.

**Table 1. Matrix of rotated components**

Communication	Component		
	COM1	COM2	COM3
Time			0.904
Accuracy	0.546		
Source		0.611	
Direction		0.602	
Frequency	0.832		
Medium		0.795	
Influence	0.658		

**Table 2. Total explained variance**

Component	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	total	% of variance	% accumulated
COM1	1.822	26.025	26.025
COM2	1.376	19.651	45.676
COM3	1.096	15.654	61.330

#### **4.4. Results**

Factor analysis revealed three elements of communication. COM1 contains elements of communication connected with its content (obtaining information essential for the buyer, their (persuasive/informational) character and information validity. Factor COM2 is related to the way of obtaining information (source of information, direction and medium). COM3, however, is related to the possibility of obtaining information on time. Buyers expect that in communication, salespersons will adapt to buyers' needs:

1. In terms of timing

- a) A vast majority (83.7%) of buyers want the salesperson to communicate with them at a time specified by the buyer. Only 9.3% agree on the salespersons determining the time of communication.
- b) Nearly 80% of buyers want the communication frequency to in accord with their expectations, and only 14.7% consent to the salesperson communicating with them more or less often than they expect.

2. In terms of direction of communication

Buyers do not want the communication to be in the form of a monologue – theirs or the salespersons – three quarters expect the salesperson to have a dialogue with them. Most of the other buyers (17.1% of the total) chose a neutral value, between a dialogue and a monologue, which could be interpreted as preferring each of these forms depending on the situation.

3. In terms of information content

Two thirds of the buyers (65.9%) thought that the salespersons should only provide information which they require and do not add anything else unless asked. 17.8% of buyers agreed on the salesperson deciding what information they provide and 16.3% of the buyers took a neutral stand in this matter.

Obtained results on buyer expectations in terms of salesperson communication were useful in determining the desirable communication behaviour of the salesperson, whose impact on relational effects was verified in the following study. It was established that if the salesperson wants to reflect the preferences of the maximum group of buyers they should then be particular about giving all information on time and as often as desired by the customer. Moreover, communication should be in the form of a direct dialogue and cover, above all, information desired by the buyer and be persuasive in character, with salesperson constituting the main source of information.



## 5. Research on communication impact on buyer-salesperson relations

### 5.1. Methodology

Here research was aimed at verifying of the adopted hypothesis on the impact of misaligned communication on relationship quality (trust, commitment, satisfaction). The basis for designing the questionnaire to study the impact of misaligned communication on buyer-salesperson relations was the behaviours that were opposite to conclusions from the study on buyer expectations in communication presented above. Thus following elements of communication COM1, COM2, COM3 were included in the questionnaire:

- also providing information not expected by the buyer (COM1),
- persuasive communication (COM1),
- communication less often or more often than desired by the buyer (COM1),
- salesperson is the only source of information (COM2),
- impersonal communication (COM2),
- communication in the form of a monologue (COM2),
- communication not on time defined by the buyer (COM3).

These communication elements were collated with the areas of relations in order to determine the impact of failing to meet buyer communication expectations in relations. This resulted in the following research plan (Table 3), where every field (e.g. SAT\_COM1) signifies the impact of not matching an element of communication (e.g. COM1) to buyer needs in relations (e.g. SAT).

**Table 3. Research plan**

Areas of relation	Elements of communications		
	COM1	COM2	COM3
SAT	SAT_COM1	SAT_COM2	SAT_COM3
TR	TR_COM1	TR_COM2	TR_COM3
COC	COC_COM1	COC_COM2	COC_COM3
COA	COA_COM1	COA_COM2	COA_COM3

A questionnaire was developed consisting of questions on elements of communication that buyers preferred in the study on expectations. Questions were concerned with the effect of not meeting expectations in relations with the salesperson. Relations were defined in terms of satisfaction, trust, commitment (affective and

calculative) and willingness to recommend. In order to conduct a study on these aspects of relations on independent samples, four questionnaires were prepared, each containing questions on one aspect of relations:

- SAT: satisfaction (e.g. "I'm dissatisfied with a salesperson who..."),
  - TR: trust (e.g. "I have no confidence in a salesperson who..."),
  - COC: calculative commitment (e.g. "It does not pay off to co-operate with a salesperson who..."),
  - COA: affective commitment (e.g. "I dislike a salesperson who..."),
- A 5 points Likert scale was used to measure the results.

With regard to the set hypotheses, buyer confidence in the salesperson as a source of information was a separate construct. Information sources were divided here into personal: controlled by the supplier (salesperson/sales representative) and not controlled by the supplier (recommendations), and impersonal (all other sources). To determine buyer confidence in the salesperson it is necessary to look through the prism of purchasing situations which were presented in two categories, each consisting of 2 subcategories: purchase from a new supplier (new product or familiar product) and purchase from a known supplier (new product or familiar product). A separate question was about work experience in purchasing.

Due to the diversity of needs and behaviours of buyers and salespersons at different stages of the process, communication is of a varied nature [Andersen 2001], which manifests itself for instance by those who participates in it. In the early phase of the relationship, communication is usually between the salesperson who represents the sales department (or other departments of the enterprise) and the buyer who represents a more or less formal buying centre, operating on behalf of units which need a particular product or service [Weitz et al. 2007]. Thus, the study was only concerned with the early phases of relationship development where it is the buyer who runs the highest risk, has the highest level of uncertainty, and at the same time has the highest information needs. Therefore, communication with the salesperson is extremely important for the buyer although it should be emphasised that the salesperson does not remain the sole source of information.

## **5.2. Organisation**

The second study on the impact of salesperson communication on relations was conducted on the second day of the PolagraFood and PolgraTech 2009 trade fair. The group was estimated at 266 persons ( $p = 0.75$ ,  $\alpha = 95\%$ ,  $e = 5.0\%$ ), based on the number of visitors as revealed by the trade fair organiser and on research results indicating that 75% of the visitors intend to meet specific exhibitors. The study was conducted by a direct interview. Every 10<sup>th</sup> person registering as a buyer was selected for the research. Interviews were conducted on entering the trade fair so that current contacts with salespersons would not affect the answers as previously, spe-

cially trained pollsters conducted the study. In total, 222 questionnaires were collected representing the following structure of sub-samples:

- Study TR: Impact of communication on trust – 56 buyers,
- Study SAT: Impact of communication on satisfaction – 56 buyers,
- Study COA: Impact of communication on affective commitment – 54 buyers,
- Study COC: Impact of communication on calculative commitment – 56 buyers.

### 5.3. Data analysis

First differences between the respondent groups (TR, SAT, COA, COC) in terms of work experience in purchasing there were analysed. They were experienced (median = 8 years, mean = 9.8 years) in purchasing. There were no significant differences between those groups (test  $\chi^2$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). Next the reliability of communication elements was assessed as ( $\alpha$ -cronbach COM1 = 0.55, COM2 = 0.49) good enough to use these factors. In order to verify these hypotheses the averages of respondents' judgements concerning particular factors were established and significance of differences between them was examined. Tab. 4 shows the results.

**Table 4. Mean and standard deviation**

Areas of relation	COM1		COM2		COM3	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SAT	4.14	1.09	3.72	1.33	4.53	0.80
TR	3.60	1.34	3.63	1.35	4.04	1.07
COA	4.06	1.21	3.76	1.32	4.57	0.69
COC	3.47	1.47	3.33	1.53	4.15	1.09

H1 was tested by comparing pairs of average evaluations for the relations: SAT, TR, COA, COC and elements of communication: COM3 and COM2, assuming that mean (COM3) > mean (COM2), and then mean (COM3) > mean (COM1). In each pair differences were marked between average evaluations that are statistically significant (with  $p = 0.01$ ), which allows us to assume that H1 concerning punctuality is an element of communication in which failing to meet needs has an adverse affect on relations, stronger than other elements of communication.

H2 was tested similarly to H1 through comparing pairs of average evaluations for relations: SAT, TR, COA, COC, REC as well as communication: COM1 and COM2, assuming that mean(COM1) > mean(COM2). Statistically significant differences (with  $p = 0.01$ ) between average evaluations were noted only for SAT, which means having to refute H2.

**Table 5. Test H1**

Pairs for which differences of means were tested	Test t parameters		Pairs for which differences of means were tested	Test t parameters	
	t	p		t	p
SAT_COM3 > SAT_COM2	7.071*	0.000	SAT_COM3 > SAT_COM1	4.056*	0.000
TR_COM3 > TR_COM2	3.453*	0.001	TR_COM3 > TR_COM1	3.731*	0.000
COA_COM3 > COA_COM2	7.915*	0.000	COA_COM3 > COA_COM1	5.127*	0.000
COC_COM3 > COC_COM2	6.078*	0.000	COC_COM3 > COC_COM1	6.074*	0.000

\* p = 0.01 (two-tailed).

**Table 6. Test H2**

Pairs for which differences of means were tested	Test t parameters	
	t	P
SAT_COM1 > SAT_COM2	3.446*	0.001
TR_COM1 > TR_COM2	-0.242	0.809
COA_COM1 > COA_COM2	2.525	0.13
COC_COM1 > COC_COM2	1.011	0.314
REC_COM1 > REC_COM2	1.522	0.123

\* p = 0.01 (two-tailed).

H3 concerning the influence of confidence in the salesperson as a source of information on the connection between failing to meet buyer communication expectations and relational effects was verified on the basis of the obtained Pearson correlation coefficients (Table 7).

**Table 7. Test H3**

Surveys	Pearson Correlation		
	COM1	COM2	COM3
SAT	-0.159 <sup>†</sup>	0.088	-0.233 <sup>**</sup>
TR	0.001	0.007	0.003
COA	-0.027	0.123	0.253 <sup>**</sup>
COC	-0.129	0.073	-0.164 <sup>†</sup>
REC	-0.086	0.012	-0.121

<sup>†</sup>p < 0.05 (two-tailed),

<sup>\*\*</sup>p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

## 5.4. Results

Hypotheses H1 and H2 assumed a varied effect of failing to meet buyer expectations in communication on their relationship with the salesperson. Results indicate that a misalignment between buyer expectations and an element of communication COM3, according to the respondents, has the greatest impact on their relationship with the salesperson throughout all areas of relations. The impact of COM1 was evaluated as smaller and COM2 as the smallest (effect on confidence is an exception). This means that punctuality is an element of communication in which failing to meet the needs has an adverse affect on relations, stronger than other elements of communication.

Refusing H2 leads to the conclusion that inadequate communication in terms of content and style influences trust, commitment and willingness to recommend the salesperson similarly. Only in the case of satisfaction it is possible to talk of the stronger impact of a misalignment between the provided information and buyer expectations on a decrease in their satisfaction with co-operation with the salesperson than it is in case of a misalignment between the style of communication and expectations.

Buyers' trust in the salesperson as a source of information differed depending on the purchasing situation. In the case of a purchase from a new supplier the average was 3.58 (on a 10-point scale where the 10 points were divided among the salesperson and other sources of information), whereas in a situation where the buyer was familiar with the salesperson the average was 6.71.

Confidence in the salesperson as a source of information in four cases was the factor moderating the impact of communication misalignment on relation, where in 3 situations it was a reverse connections which would confirm the assumptions of H3. From among the factors timeliness of communications is that which was most often moderated through the level of confidence. Analysing the results through the prism of relational effects one can see that the greatest influence of confidence in the salesperson may be observed in the case of satisfaction. However, the identified interdependences were not strong which is proven by the low values of the obtained Pearson coefficients. Therefore, it seems that there are no grounds for supporting H3, which means that buyer confidence in the salesperson as a source of information does not influence how a misalignment between communication and buyer expectations influences their relationship with the salesperson.

## 6. Discussion

The paper was based on the assumption that buyer-salesperson communication has an impact on their mutual relations. Literature indicates a positive effect of communication on business-to-business relations. The main characteristic of the research was a desire to determine how communication that does not meet buyer expectations may influence buyer-salesperson relations.

Established at the first research stage the form of communication desired by the buyer was determined and three elements of communication: timeliness, content and style, used in further research. When interpreting the obtained results one needs to remember that the elements were chosen on the basis of a factor analysis, which explained 61% of all answer variance. There may be doubts concerning the choice of such communication factors, especially since this approach diverges from scales used in other research projects (e.g. Mohr and Spekman in order to evaluate communication quality developed a scale comprising timeliness, accuracy and adequacy [Mohr & Spekman 1994]). However, testing the adopted approach in further research could expand the possibilities of conducting research on buyer-salesperson communication. In the case of the majority of examined sets of opposite (based on semantic differential) expectations concerning communication, buyers were relatively unanimous in their choices. An exception was expectations related to the impact / lack of impact of supplier, where respondents gave a wide range of answers. Most buyers do not oppose the idea of salespersons trying to change their convictions, but two fifths expect the salesperson not to use persuasive communication. This means that possibly in business-to-business marketing the need to use communication focused on informing, gathering information and explaining and not only persuading [Duncan & Moriarty 1988] is overly emphasised. On the other hand, informational communication helps to shape the salesperson's orientation towards the client rather than sales [Guenzi et al. 2007], which is characterised by a lesser degree of relational attitude to the client [Wachner et al. 2009].

Research confirmed the great influence of communication on buyer-salesperson relations. Buyers are sensitive about not meeting their communication expectations and declare that inadequate communication will mainly negatively affect their satisfaction in co-operation with the salesperson and calculative commitment, and also their confidence in the salesperson, affective commitment and willingness to recommend the salesperson to other buyers.

This outcome confirms the results of other researchers who also see communication as the most important factor in achieving successful inter-firm cooperation in the agro-food market [Fisher et al. 2008]. Results indicated that the most important contributor to good supply chain relationships (perceived as satisfactory, involved and based on trust) is the adequate frequency and high quality of communication. According to researchers communication can foster the creation of

sustainable business relationships and contribute to their stability and evolution. Beyond the exchange of information, communication can contribute to chain performance and stakeholder satisfaction, as well as the quality of the relationship in terms of mutual trust and commitment.

The strongest effect on the relationship was noted in terms of timeliness that is more important than content and style of communication (H1 was supported). Buyers must do their work and expect primarily to receive information on time, just when they need it. This is what salespersons should focus on. One ought to carefully manage the timeliness of communication, even when the provided information is not entirely according to buyer expectations or when the form of providing the information will not meet their expectations. Since, if information is not delivered on time adverse effect of the delay on the relations will be greater than when expectations concerning other elements of communication are not met. The importance of timeliness may be explained by the fact that communication leads to confidence as it enables conflict resolution and adapts perceptions and expectations to the possibility of implementing them [Moorman et al. 1993].

The importance of content and communication style turned out to be similar (H2 was not supported). One needs to bear in mind that respondents agreed with the statements that said that not meeting expectations as far as provided information is concerned will have a negative effect on all areas of relations. A confirmation of these findings is the worldwide survey of industrial buyers, that suggests that more than half of perceive their sales contact as a business partner and expect to receive quality advice on products or services [Agnihotri et al. 2009]

Style appeared to be the element of communication which, if not matched to needs, according to the respondents, will have a weaker influence on the relationship than other elements of communication. This probably results from the professional character of the surveyed buyers, for whom it is more important what information they will receive and when rather than in what form. It is good to remember that other studies indicate that there is an impact of communication style on judgements about the quality of service [Wong & Tjosvold 1995] or satisfaction [Webster & Sundaram 2009]. Relationships develop when a buyer lowers their level of uncertainty enabling them to be more confident in relations with the salesperson [Claycomb & Frankwick 2010]. This is why salespersons should be particular about communicating in accordance with buyer expectations since otherwise – as this research showed – their relations with buyers will deteriorate.

The level of buyer confidence in the salesperson as a source of information at the beginning of their relationship does not moderate the communication misalignment impact on relations (H3 was not supported). This means that irrespective of how the buyer seems to trust the salesperson, communication not in accord with to buyer expectations will have a negative effect on their relations and it is probably a confirmation for great significance in communication for buyer-salesperson rela-



tions. If communication is important for the buyer then its inadequate use by the salesperson spoils relations, regardless of whether the buyer uses other sources of information or not. In the situation of purchasing from a new supplier, examined in the study, a dissatisfied buyer may resort to other sources of information, often independent of the salesperson. Only after building relations does the credibility of the information provided by the salesperson increase.

It appears that poor communication might adversely affect vendor relationship with the customer. However, the misalignment can also have positive effects – may lead to a discussion between partners, create solutions to the problem and ultimately improve communication and satisfaction. Heterogeneity in communication approaches and solutions may assure, that the relation remains flexible and susceptible to changes.

## **7. Limitations on further research**

Research results presented in this paper embraced more than 380 professional buyers. However, because of a desire to obtain data from independent samples, the groups concerned with the study on the communication impact on particular areas of relations were relatively small. Our methodology was designed to overcome time and cost limitations, but further research needs to undertake a wider (greater sample from different industries) or longitudinal study to examine changes in buyer expectations concerning communication and the effect of inadequate communication on relations in the subsequent stages of the relationship. A model of communication dependency on the stage of relationship assumes a change in communication behaviours along with relationship development on account of increasing mutual adaptation of the buyer and salesperson [Andersen 2001].

As a rule, different members of a buying centre participate in long-term relationships with suppliers. Our research relied on purchasing professionals within the buying-centre as respondents. Moreover, it only concerned a situation of purchasing from a new supplier, in which the buyer is not familiar with the salesperson. Further research could include several members of the buying centre who interact with the salesperson. Qualitative research would allow exploration of the misalignment of the selling centre and buyer centre's needs from the network perspective.

In addition, research should embrace other purchase situations (modified and routine purchase). Meanwhile, the role of the salesperson is varied depending on the purchasing situation. We did not include all possible moderator variables, which could be used in further research. For example, buyer experience or salesperson reputation [Claycomb & Frankwick 2010] could be considered as moderators. It would also be interesting to determine the impact of meeting communication ex-

pectations on relations (also in the context of relationship phase). Relational context might also be included because it can be assumed that the relationship phase could determine the impact of a misalignment between salesperson communication and buyer need on mutual relations.

An additional limitation of this work is that research was conducted only among Poles from one industry. Obtained results must therefore also be looked at from a cultural perspective. Hall [1976] pointed to the role of communication in low and high context cultures, referring to the amount of implicit and explicit information contained in a message as compared to cues specific to the context. Previous research suggests that actors orientations towards adaptation and mutual problem solving differ across national cultures [Andersen et al. 2009]. Poland is among the “low context” countries where interpersonal relations play a vital role, and so does direct interpersonal communication in business. This could affect respondents’ tendency to declare a strong negative effect of not meeting communication expectations relations with the salesperson.

Referring to the results presented in this paper it should be remembered that research was conducted in 2008–2009. We assume, however, that they relate to social issues that do not change dynamically. This is due to the professional nature of business relationships – they do not change rapidly. Food industry conditions have not in the previous years changed enough to alter communication and the importance of the business-to-business relationship.

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