
Relationship Quality and Buyer–Seller Interactions in Channels of Distribution

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This study considers how relationship marketing is manifest in actual interactions between buyers and sellers involved in on-going relationships with varying degrees of relationship quality. Seven buyer–seller, interaction encounters were observed, audiotaped, and analyzed. Before observing the encounters, however, in-depth interviews were conducted with the buyers to determine their perceived quality of the relationships within which the interactions would occur. Qualitative and empirically based evidence suggest systematic, behavioral differences across the interactions. Specifically, the results suggest that relatively higher-quality relationships tend to exhibit more friendliness, less question asking, disagreement, and compliance behavior as compared with lower-quality relationships. Buyers in lower-quality relationships tend to dominate the interaction by disagreeing and talking a larger percentage of the time relative to buyers in higher-quality relationships. As the quality of the relationship increases, however, buyers disagree less and allow sellers more latitude in time spent talking. J BUSN RES 1999. 46.303–313. © 1999 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

The 1990s will likely be remembered as the “relationship marketing decade” in business history. Scores of practitioners and academics have turned their attention to the concept of relationship marketing and its impact on customer interactions with sellers, distribution channel members, internal functions, and even competitors (e.g., Grönroos, 1994). In this study, we add to this growing knowledge base by investigating how relationship marketing might be manifest in “everyday” exchange interactions between actual buyers and sellers in channels of distribution as a function of the level of relationship quality present in these relationships. Therefore,

we focus on the tactical/behavioral, or “specific” strategies that buyers and sellers employ in their on-going encounters and how these strategies may differ across varying degrees of relationship quality.

Face-to-face, buyer–seller interactions, as demonstrated in personal selling, have been described as “the most important element in marketing communications” (Weitz, 1978, p. 501). In face-to-face interactions, buyers and sellers engage in dynamic bargaining and communication processes that can dramatically change the attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of all involved (Strutton, Pelton, and Lumpkin, 1995; Woodside and Reingen, 1981). Recognizing this, scholars in the personal selling literature have focused considerable attention on interpersonal communication behavior (e.g., verbal and nonverbal messages) between end-user consumers and salespeople (e.g., Hulbert and Capon, 1972; Leight, 1980; Sheth, 1976; Wiener, LaForge, and Goolsby, 1990; Willett and Pennington, 1966; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams, Spiro, and Fine, 1990). From a managerial standpoint, buyers and sellers who understand the behaviors of their exchange partners are in a better position to foster constructive exchanges and avoid less productive encounters.

Despite the importance of understanding selling encounters and exchange processes, there is very little, if any, research that empirically examines face-to-face interactions between actual buyers and sellers in the channels of distribution literature. Research on face-to-face interaction strategies between channel members has been limited to the use of business students in laboratory settings who are asked to mimic channel member bargaining and communication behaviors (Angelmar and Stern, 1978; Dwyer and Walker, 1981; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985).

The present study is a first step in exploring the everyday, behavioral enactment of relationship marketing in ongoing interactions between actual buyers and sellers in a channel

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of distribution; that is, the microlevel workings of channel relationships. Seven interaction encounters between actual retail buyers and sellers were observed, audiotaped, and analyzed. Prior to the encounters, in-depth interviews were conducted with the buyers concerning their relationships with each of the sellers in order to gain an understanding of the relationship context (i.e., level of quality) within which each interaction would occur. Based on the buyers' perceptions of the relationship quality with each seller (obtained in the in-depth interviews), we ordered the buyer–seller meetings along a continuum denoting the reported quality of each buyer–seller relationship. We then examined how a number of behavioral communication variables (friendliness, question asking, disagreements, compliance, and time spent talking) varied across the meetings and noted what seems to be systematic patterns and differences.

Although the discussion may seem to suggest a causal ordering between relationship quality and specific communication behaviors, this is *not* our intention. The interactions examined here are *on-going*, and, therefore, it is impossible to separate causes from effects. Although researchers have examined the effects of relationship quality on specific behaviors, they acknowledge that the reverse sequence is also likely to be true—that specific behaviors can affect levels of relationship quality. The reality is that the directionality of effects between buyers and sellers is cyclical in nature (Darley and Fazio, 1980) and impossible to disentangle in a one-time, cross-sectional study.

Instead, our goal is to share some qualitative and empirically based evidence obtained from real interactions so as to *stimulate thought and motivate additional research* on how relationship quality is behaviorally manifested in ongoing relationships between buyers and sellers in the distribution channel. We acknowledge that our sample size is limited, and the retailing context may limit the generalizability of our results. However, in light of our intention to stimulate thought and interest, our data seem to suggest some directions for future thinking and research. We offer a variety of inferences and conclusions based on a review of relevant literature and observed empirical patterns across face-to-face encounters.

In the next section, we discuss relationship quality and some potential manifestations of it in face-to-face, buyer–seller interactions. Following this, we outline our research approach and describe our data analysis techniques. Finally, we discuss the findings, limitations, directions for future research, and implications for management.

Relationship Quality and Buyer–Seller Interactions

On-going buyer–seller interactions occur within a relational context, or a past history of interactions that color and shape each party's perceptions, intentions, and attitudes. In this study, we use relationship quality, as assessed by buyers, to

indicate the relational context—the backdrop—for the observed buyer–seller encounters. Relationship quality captures the essence of relationship marketing. High-quality relationships between buyers and sellers bind the members to each other in such a way that they are able to reap benefits beyond the mere exchange of goods and currency (Macneil, 1980). In turn, this fosters long-term, more stable exchanges in which both members mutually benefit (Ford, 1980).

In the following sections, we draw on past research in the channels literature to introduce the notion of relationship quality and its multiple dimensions—trust, conflict, expectations of continuity, and disengagement. Because the focus of our inquiry is on how buyers and sellers behave in face-to-face encounters, we draw on work on interpersonal interaction in social psychology and the personal selling literature to hypothesize how relationship quality may be behaviorally manifested by means of various indicators of affect (friendliness) and effort (question asking, disagreements, compliance, time spent talking).

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality typically is manifest in several distinct, although related, constructs (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990; Dwyer and Oh, 1987; Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer, 1995; Rousseau, 1995). Although there is no consensus to date in terms of developing long-term, buyer–seller relationships, trust and effort are believed to be central issues. Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987), for example, point to the importance of trust, commitment, and disengagement. Kumar, Scheer, and Stennkamp (1995) add conflict and two constructs that are the converse of disengagement: willingness to invest and expectations of continuity.

A useful way for organizing these constructs is to view relationship quality as consisting of *evaluations of various aspects of relationship—attitudinal, process, and future expectations*. In our in-depth interviews, we found that trust, affective and manifest conflict, disengagement, and expectations of continuity were generally the constructs identified most often by buyers to distinguish between higher versus lower levels of quality in seller–supplier relationships. These characteristics communicated a buyer's attitudinal evaluation (trust) of the relationship, described process characteristics (conflict level and attempts to disengage or distance themselves from the vendor), and included expectations regarding the relationship's future.

We used buyer perceptions of relationship quality as a means by which to order the various interpersonal encounters before examining specific behaviors within the encounters. We make an implicit assumption that the buyer's view of relationship quality and its various aspects will be manifest in a number of affective and behavioral responses, which we describe in the next section. (Although a buyer's attitudes and evaluations probably drive her or his affective and behavioral responses in an interpersonal interaction, we by no means dismiss the

role of the other party during the interaction. We recognize that the buyer's responses and behaviors are also affected and often contingent on the actions and reactions of the vendor over the course of the encounter.) This notion is consistent with research in psychology that views attitudes as a basis for cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Thus, we rank-ordered the seven buyer–seller relationships from higher to lower quality in terms of trust, affective and manifest conflict, disengagement levels, and expectations of continuity. We use this as a basis for understanding the buyer's context and viewing specific interaction behaviors.

TRUST. *Trust is the belief that the seller is motivated to act in the buyer's interests and would not act opportunistically if given the chance to do so.* (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh, 1987; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985). One buyer described the level of trust in his relationship this way: "That company works very openly—we have a very good relationship with that company. They're very open and honest. I get the distinct impression that they're trying to do what's right for both of us. I've never been stabbed in the back."

CONFLICT. Conflict is typically viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of latent conflict, perceived conflict, affective conflict, manifest conflict, and conflict aftermath (Brown, Lusch, and Smith, 1991). Of these, the two most commonly studied aspects are affective and manifest conflict. *Affective conflict is hostility, frustration, and anger toward the other party* (Brown, Lusch, and Smith; Frazier, Gill, and Kale, 1989; Kaufmann and Stern, 1988). One buyer expressed disgust with a seller's behavior: "When he first came down—he came from the Cleveland area—he was a bit cocky. And he kind of came in here like, 'well, this is what you're going to do and this is what I want you to do and this is how we do it in Cleveland.' And I don't care. Because this isn't Cleveland."

Manifest conflict is characterized by behavioral responses, including open expressions of disagreement and/or overt attempts to prevent the other party from achieving its goals (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Brown, Lusch, and Smith, 1991; Frazier, Gill, and Kale, 1989; Kaufmann and Stern, 1988). One buyer described manifest conflict in this way: "There are some manufacturers though, that say, 'Hey, I want you to add these 12 SKUs (stock keeping units) this period. And, if you want to eliminate something, you go find other space somewhere else in your store or some other competitors.'"

EXPECTATIONS OF CONTINUITY. *Expectations of continuity assess the buyer's perceptions of both his or her own and his or her seller's intentions to continue the relationship into the future* (Ganesan, 1994; Heide and Miner, 1992; Noordewier, John, and Nevin, 1990). One buyer's description of his on-going relationship with a seller noted, "He's the only guy that's got a standing appointment every week. The other ones, you know, they call to make an appointment and everything."

DISENGAGEMENT. *Disengagement involves instances in which one of the parties attempts to distance him or herself from the other party or terminate the relationship* (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). One buyer shared an experience in which a seller was repeatedly calling her over trivialities. Fed up with his badgering, she threatened, "Jack, if you call me one more time, I'm going to cancel the sale." Another buyer admitted that, "You know, I guess subconsciously you will make decisions to make that seller not be as successful by not putting all of their items in the planogram, etc. You hate to think that, but you know, you get into behavioral circumstances and it's gonna happen."

In sum, relationship quality can be conceptualized in terms of a continuum consisting of these constructs and behaviors (Anderson and Narus, 1991). Relationships lower in quality are likely to exhibit a higher level of conflict, lower trust, greater use of disengagement attempts, and a shorter-term orientation relative to higher-quality relationships (Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Ganesan, 1994; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). There is little effort to develop their relationship beyond the exchange or contract (i.e., a discrete-like transaction), as indicated by one buyer:

I don't do anything to make it easy for that person. But I don't do anything bad for my business. And there's a big difference there. I don't—I won't do anything to help him, but I won't do anything to hurt us either, so if something is right for us, regardless of whether I like him or not, then that can't influence how I'm gonna handle it. But I just handle it very—it's strictly business then. Very cautious. More so than I am with somebody whose program I can take on its face value . . . nothing you know—it's not so cut and dry that "this guy is out and this guy is in." But you just like—in life and everything else, you can do a little extra or just do enough to get by (emphasis added).

As one moves along the continuum toward higher quality relationships, one should observe higher levels of trust, lower levels of conflict and disengagement, and a longer-term orientation (Lusch and Brown, 1996). Many buyers noted that improved relational quality often translates into a willingness to take risks, consensus between parties, and improved performance (Rousseau, 1995):

You find out with those type of sellers you move a heck of a lot of product. And when he comes in with a new SKU—it might be an item that's totally off the wall—but you sit there and say, "Well, this is similar to another manufacturer's item," and I've seen it happen, where we'll take those SKUs. And, if they bomb, you call them up on the phone and five minutes later on the fax machine you've got a return to get rid of it. So you're not tying up a lot of working capital and you're prone to be more aggressive with that manufacturer (emphasis added).

We used statements such as the preceding to classify and rank order the interactions along a continuum of relationship

quality. Having developed a basis for higher versus lower levels of relationship quality among the buyers and sellers, we now consider specific communication behavior on the part of these exchange participants. That is, we now turn our attention to the particular behaviors exhibited in face-to-face, buyer–seller interactions and consider whether or not these interactive behaviors are associated with varying levels of relationship quality.

BUYER–SELLER INTERACTION. Given the cyclical nature of relationship quality, and specific behaviors enacted during the course of an interaction, we would expect that relationships varying in quality would also exhibit varying degrees (patterns) of face-to-face, interaction behavior. That is, behavior adumbrative of varying types of human interaction or relationships (e.g., cooperative versus combative interaction, close versus superficial relationships) should also distinguish among varying types of buyer–seller relationships. Specifically, we suggest that the quality of relationships among buyers and sellers is likely to manifest itself through, among others, five interpersonal interaction behaviors: friendliness, question asking, disagreements, compliance, and time spent talking. (Although clearly not exhaustive in nature, these variables represent an incremental step in our understanding of how relationship marketing is manifest in face-to-face, buyer–seller interactions).

The first behavior, friendliness, is a measure of affect in the relationship. Affect, as specified in social psychological research involving human interaction (Rosenthal, 1989), delineates an important dimension of interpersonal behavior and is communicated primarily through nonverbal channels (e.g., smiling behavior). The other behaviors represent measures of effort in developing the relationship. Effort delineates another important dimension of interactional behavior (Rosenthal, 1989) and is communicated primarily through verbal channels (e.g., talking behavior). In addition to representing commonly measured variables in research on interpersonal interaction and communication (e.g., Harris and Rosenthal 1985; Word, Zanna, and Cooper, 1974), these behaviors also represent variables used in marketing research on buyer–seller interactions (e.g., Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996; Reingen and Kernan, 1993; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985; see also Williams, Spiro, and Fine, 1990). In sum, we expect these behaviors to vary in predictable and systematic ways. Next, we discuss the behaviors along with our predictions.

FRIENDLINESS. Higher quality buyer–seller relationships should exhibit higher levels of friendliness as compared with lower-quality relationships because friendliness helps set the tone for an interaction or meeting by encouraging parties to share openly and collaboratively. Subtle, mutually reinforcing behaviors that flow from friendly, personal relationships provide a basis for increased trust. In the channels of distribution literature, Rinehart and Page (1992) developed a self-report item of friendliness as a partial determinant of personal influ-

ence. Personal influence, in turn, was shown to have a significant, positive effect on buyer–seller negotiations.

QUESTION ASKING. Question asking is likely to be higher when relationship quality is lower than when it is higher. In addition to experiencing higher degrees of trust among one another, parties engaged in higher-quality, on-going relations have learned to interact and communicate very efficiently (Anderson and Weitz, 1989). Thus, question asking should be less prevalent. In lower-quality relationships, on the other hand, communication may not be as efficient or well articulated and thus question asking is likely to be more common. In their study on buying behavior and buyer–seller interactions, Schurr and Ozanne (1985) found higher levels of question asking to be associated with tougher bargaining tactics. Perhaps asking more questions leads to, or is exacerbated by, potentially higher levels of conflict in lower-quality relationships.

DISAGREEMENT. Relatively more conflict in lower- versus higher-quality exchange relationships is likely to be manifest by a greater incidence of disagreement statements. Disagreements may arise if one or both parties (buyers and/or sellers) display a lack of thoroughness or preparation, insensitivity to the other's time and needs, opportunistic behavior, or an unwillingness to adjust to changing circumstances (Jackson, 1994).

COMPLIANCE. *Compliance is a response to conflict or an attempt to appease the other party.* This is more likely to be observed in lower-quality relationships where the level of conflict is high relative to higher-quality relationships. For example, in a study looking at bargaining communication among buyers and sellers, Galinat and Müller (1988) found that sales persons were compliant (i. e., avoided verbally rough communication) when buyers behaved in very demanding ways (i.e., low relationship quality).

TIME SPENT TALKING. *Time spent talking is the proportion of total meeting (interaction) time that a person (buyer or seller) spends talking.* One would expect that under conditions of low relationship quality, a more aggressive exchange partner might try to exert power or influence outcomes by talking a disproportionately higher percentage of time relative to a less aggressive partner. As relationship quality increases, however, the nature of the interaction should become more bilateral, with parties spending more or less equal time talking. This prediction is based, in part, on the results of a study by Dwyer and Walker (1981). Examining bargaining processes in the marketing channel, Dwyer and Walker found that powerful bargainers sent a larger proportion of demanding-threatening messages than they did when power was balanced.

Method

Research Setting

A retailing context provides an ideal setting in which to examine how relationship marketing is manifest behaviorally among

buyers and sellers in channels of distribution. Unlike industrial buyers who may forge exclusive relationships centered on the development and attainment of strategic advantages with few sellers, retail buyers regularly meet with and buy from a variety of sellers who must compete with each other for retail shelf space. Hence, within a specific product category, retail buyers are likely to have a number of on-going relationships that may vary in terms of quality.

In the past decade, the growing power of retailers in channels of distribution has been a widely discussed issue; retailers are now seen as powerful gatekeepers—the mediating customer—to the end-user consumer. Given the customer focus inherent in the relationship marketing paradigm, retailing is a suitable setting for examining behavioral manifestations of relationship marketing between buyers and sellers.

THE CORPORATION. Data collection was conducted with one of the five largest grocery chains in the United States. (The company, informants, and vendors have been masked to maintain confidentiality.) This company has annual sales of over \$22 billion, operating over 1,200 stores across the United States. Data collection took place in the procurement group of the largest selling area, responsible for over 90 stores and 1,100 SKUs.

INFORMANTS. In-depth interviews and interaction data were obtained from four key informants—three buyers in grocery procurement (GRO) and one in health and beauty aids (HBA). The buyers' procurement responsibilities were as follows:

- GRO 1—paper products, frozen foods, canned foods;
- GRO 2—soap, cereals, dry foods;
- GRO 3—speciality food items (international foods, diet foods, condiments); and
- HBA—drug merchandise.

The four buyers had been in procurement for an average of 6 years and had experience in other areas of retailing, such as store management.

Procedure

One of the researchers spent 3 days on-site conducting interviews, attending meetings, and observing various buyer–seller interactions at headquarter and procurement offices. Six one and one-half hour interviews with three senior category managers, one senior group manager, the vice president of grocery procurement, and a senior group manager in HBA were audiotaped. Corporate meetings were also attended, such as weekly review meetings and an annual business review meeting with a major seller-supplier. These preliminary procedures were undertaken in order to provide the researchers with a grounded understanding of the procurement context wherein the buyers and sellers operated.

As mentioned earlier, half-hour in-depth interviews with each of the four key informants (buyers) were conducted to gain insight into the quality of their relationships with each

seller observed in the face-to-face encounters. The buyer-informants were asked to discuss the history of their relationships with the sellers and were probed to reveal associated preferences, interpretations, and expectations. Buyers were also asked to explain similarities and differences that existed between their relationships with these sellers and alternatives.

Finally, seven buyer–seller interactions (meetings) involving the four key buyer-informants were observed and audiotaped. In all of the meetings, the sellers were introducing new grocery products to the retail buyers. Managing new product introductions represents a significant portion of a retail buyer's duties. One day a week, for example, buyers typically accept half-hour appointments for new product meetings with sellers. After the meetings, buyers research the feasibility of the proposed new products and then present their findings and recommendations to a buying committee that reviews products and makes decisions on which new products to accept.

Analysis

Buyer Interviews

The pre-interaction, in-depth interviews with the buyers were transcribed and analyzed. The analysis attempted to disclose patterns and themes, and to cluster the observations into conceptual groupings in terms of five dimensions of relationship quality: trust, affective and manifest conflict, expectations of continuity, and disengagement. Two judges independently reviewed the interview transcripts and recorded the number of comments made that indicated various dimensions of relationship quality (examples of these statements were provided in the conceptual framework section). They then evaluated the degree of each dimension (i.e., high, low, moderate) in each comment and then rank ordered the relationships according to their judgment of the various levels of relationship quality dimensions present in the data. They then pooled their results and collectively determined any remaining anomalies. The final result was a rank ordering of the five meetings along a relationship quality continuum as displayed in Figure 1. (The scale is ordinal versus interval in nature, and, as such, does *not* necessarily imply equal distances between meetings.)

Buyer–Seller Interactions

In accordance with a plethora of social interaction research from social psychology (e.g., Neuberger, 1989) and selected studies in marketing (e.g., Reingen, Gresham, and Kernan, 1980), judges coded the behaviors of interest from the audiotaped, buyer–seller interactions. (In addition to an audiotape cassette, raters were also supplied with a written transcript of each meeting.) The judges were blind to the level of relationship quality ascribed to each meeting. After completing a brief training session, the judges coded the interactions in terms of friendliness, question asking, disagreement, compliance, and time spent talking. The behaviors (variables) were rated separately for buyers and sellers. Each judge coded all the

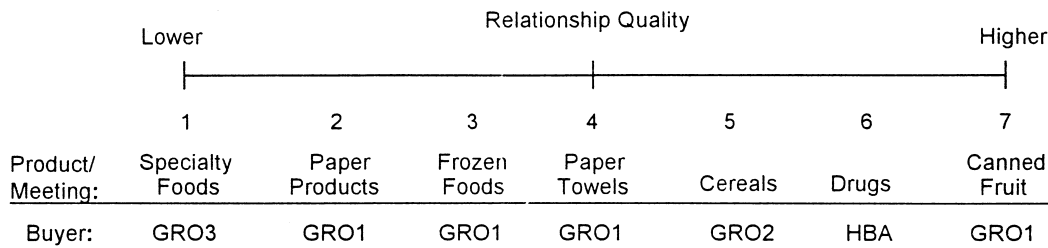


Figure 1. Continuum of Relationship Quality Interactions.

audiotapes (meetings) for a given behavior; however, no judge coded more than two behaviors. In the event that two or more buyers and/or sellers participated in a particular meeting, the buyers' and sellers' behaviors, respectively were combined and analyzed concurrently (i.e., as a group).

CODING SCHEME. The behaviors were coded as follows. First, friendliness consisted of five judges' global ratings of buyers' and sellers' friendliness toward their exchange partner or partners. This was assessed via the use of a 9-point, Likert-type scale where 1 = very cold, hostile, unfriendly; 9 = extremely warm, positive friendly. Second, question asking was operationalized as the frequency of questions that one exchange party asked the other, and was coded by four judges. An example might be, "Would you do that?" Third, disagreement was coded by three judges and consisted of the frequency of statements indicating discrepancy. These are not only negatively toned statements (e.g., "No, let's do it this way." "You're wrong.") but also such statements as, "I still think I'd like to." and "That's not the point." Fourth, compliance was coded by four judges and refers to the frequency of statements or comments indicating compliance. This included positive statements ("Good idea.") as well as agreement statements (e.g., "Yes, let's do that." "Let's go with that." or "I think you're right."). Fifth, time spent talking was the actual percentage of time the buyer(s) or seller(s) spent talking, as measured by two judges (Harris and Rosenthal, 1985).

Table 1 indicates the number of judges who evaluated each variable, as well as the interreliabilities of the evaluations. The intercoder reliabilities, based on the Spearman-Brown formula (see Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1991), are fairly high (Cohen and Cohen, 1983) and range from 0.67 to 0.99 with a mean of 0.86.

Table 1. Reliability of the Behavioral Variables

| Behavior Variable | No. of Judges | Buyers | Suppliers |
|-------------------|---------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | | Intercoder Reliability | Intercoder Reliability |
| Friendliness | 5 | 0.83 | 0.79 |
| Question asking | 4 | 0.99 | 0.97 |
| Disagreement | 3 | 0.91 | 0.86 |
| Compliance | 4 | 0.97 | 0.93 |
| Talking time | 2 | 0.70 | 0.67 |

Although the reliability coefficients for the time spent talking variable (0.70 and 0.67 for buyers and sellers, respectively) are not as high as we would have liked, we believe that the variable is reliable and there is no cause for concern. Time spent talking is the most objective of the behavioral variables utilized in this study (Harris, Milich, Corbitt, Hoover, and Brady, 1992), so we expected that it would be the most reliable of our measures. As a result we only assigned two (instead of three or four) judges to code this variable. Thus, the lower reliability scores for this variable may be attributable to the fact that only two scores were used to calculate the coefficients (see Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1991). Finally, Cohen and Cohen (1983) suggest that reliabilities of 0.60 are not uncommon in the behavioral sciences, and, in some circumstances, may be considered reasonably good.

The means for each of the behavioral variables are displayed in Table 2 and Figure 2. An examination of the variables across meetings reveals some distinct and interesting trends. For example, friendliness, as expected, generally increases with relationship quality for both buyers and sellers. Also as expected, question asking tends to be higher under lower relational quality and then decreases as relationship quality increases. And, not surprisingly, buyers tend to ask more questions as compared to sellers. Disagreement behavior, as predicted, is generally higher under lower relationship quality (particularly for buyers) and then decreases as relationship quality increases. Basically consistent with predictions, compliance tends to be higher under lower relationship quality and then decreases as relationship quality increases.

Last, time spent talking, not unlike question-asking behavior, tends to display dissimilar patterns for buyers as compared to sellers. Specifically, buyers tend to spend less time talking, and sellers seem to talk a greater percentage of the time as relationship quality increases. We also note that it is possible for buyers to spend less time talking and still dominate the interaction in terms of question asking, disagreement, and compliance. This is because it takes little time to ask a question (e.g., "What have they got?" "Okay?" "Would you do that?") or make quick comments (e.g., "Good idea." "I think you're right." "Hmm . . . Mmm . . . Yeah" "Okay, I got ya."). Although we might expect that buyer and supplier talking time should sum to unity, various periods of silence and coding differences may prevent these from summing to one on a consistent basis.

Table 2. Means of Behavioral Variable across Meetings

| Variable | Relationship Quality | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|-------------------------|------|------------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------------------|--------|--------------|------|------------|------|----------------------|------|------|
| | Lower | | | | | | | Higher | | | | | | | |
| | 1 Specialty Foods | | 2 Paper Products | | 3 Frozen Foods | | 4 Paper Towels | | 5 Cereals | | 6 Drugs | | 7 Canned Fruit | | |
| | B | S | B | S | B | S | B | S | B | S | B | S | B | S | |
| Friendliness | 6.3 | 5.6 | 5.0 | 7.4 | 71.0 | 6.4 | 5.2 | 5.4 | 5.8 | 4.4 | 4.6 | 6.4 | 6.6 | 7.8 | 7.0 |
| Questioning | 33.1 | 92.8 | 66.8 | 26.3 | 19.3 | 38.0 | 12.8 | 37.0 | 28.8 | 30.3 | 17.0 | 22.3 | 22.3 | 31.3 | 41.3 |
| Disagreement | 3.9 | 5.0 | 3.7 | 8.3 | 3.0 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 5.7 | 2.7 | 1.7 | 1.3 | 2.3 | 2.7 | 1.7 | 2.0 |
| Compliance | 27.3 | 59.8 | 70.8 | 35.3 | 36.0 | 26.3 | 24.0 | 13.0 | 24.5 | 7.3 | 12.5 | 7.5 | 26.5 | 62.5 | 19.3 |
| Talking time | 0.27 | 0.4 | 0.28 | 0.29 | 0.52 | 0.30 | 0.35 | 0.29 | 0.36 | 0.25 | 0.52 | 0.24 | 0.67 | 0.17 | 0.55 |

Conclusions

Discussion of Results

The results are informative in understanding how relationship marketing might be enacted in everyday, face-to-face, buyer–seller interactions. Collectively, the results seem to suggest that higher-quality relationships, identified according to levels of trust, conflict, disengagement, and continuity expectations, may exhibit more friendliness and less question asking, disagreement, and compliance relative to lower-quality relationships. Moreover, these findings are generally consistent with current thinking on relationship quality. For example, higher-quality relationships often exhibit higher degrees of trust and fewer incidences of opportunistic behavior as compared to lower-quality relationships (Bradach and Eccles, 1989; Granovetter, 1985).

As an interesting aside, we found that the new product items introduced in the higher-quality relationship interactions were accepted more readily than the new items presented in the lower-quality relationships. Acceptance decisions on new product items in higher-quality relationships were made the same week; whereas, decisions on items in lower-quality relationships were postponed to a later date.

The findings also point to some interesting behavioral dissimilarities among buyers and sellers. In particular, buyers seemed to disagree and talk more when relationship quality is lower; as relationship quality increases, both of these behaviors tend to decrease. Sellers, on the other hand, exhibit somewhat different patterns of behavior. Although they, like the buyers, tend to disagree less as relationship quality increases, they do not disagree to the same extent as buyers when relationship quality is low. And, sellers, unlike the buyers, tend to spend a larger percentage of time talking as relationship quality increases. A *post hoc* interpretation of these results suggests that, given low levels of relationship quality, buyers, as compared to sellers, may choose to exert their power in the relationship by making more disagreeing statements and dominating the conversation. As relationship quality improves, however, buyers tend to disagree less and allow the sellers more latitude in terms of talking time.

Limitations

As in any research, there are limitations regarding the results and contributions of this study. First, only one type of buyer–seller interaction encounter was observed—those with relatively powerful sellers (i.e., category leaders) who were making new product introductions. Relationship marketing actions (and reactions) might conceivably be manifest differently under different circumstances. For example, in annual review meetings, we might expect to find an increased willingness on the part of buyers to make investments into relationships or cooperate and develop mutually beneficial joint projects with sellers.

Second, it is important to note that, as in any social interac-

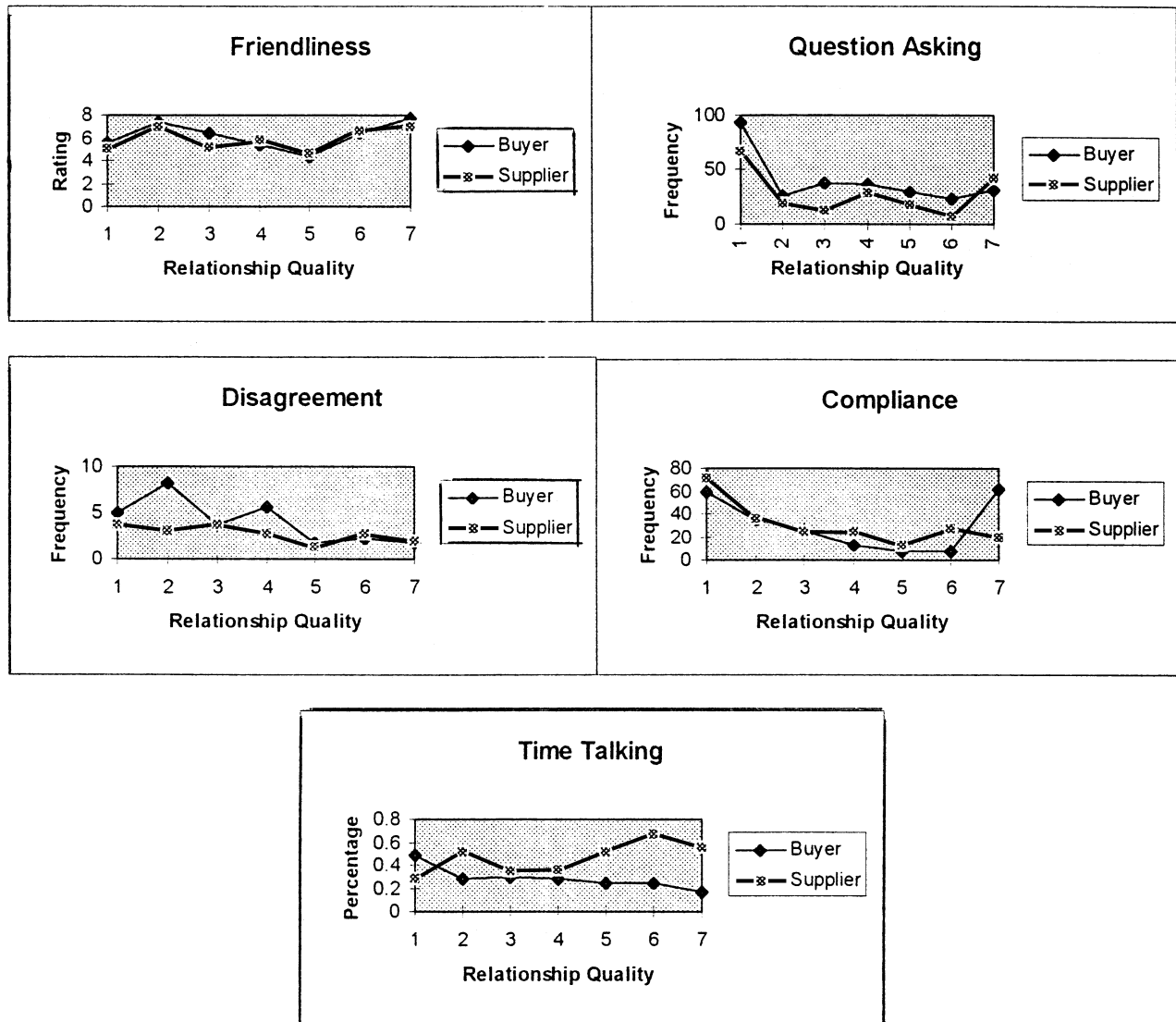


Figure 2. Means of Behavioral Variables.

tion context, the “cause-and-effect” relationships (i.e., directionality of effects) specified here between buyers and sellers are surely cyclical in nature (Darley and Fazio, 1980). That is, although we portray relationship quality as the context that facilitates the display of certain interpersonal behaviors on the part of buyers and sellers, we readily acknowledge that the behavior exhibited during a buyer–seller interaction also shapes and significantly affects the quality of the relationship.

Third, the generalizability of results to other buyer–seller contexts may be limited. For example, because the current buyers are retailers (i.e., resellers), the results may not be useful to interactions involving end-user buyers (consumers). Also, because retailers are forced to carry a variety of products and work with numerous seller-suppliers, the results may not

clearly transfer to industrial buying situations where buyers may work with sole-source sellers.

Finally, it is important to note that the sample size was limited because of the inherent difficulty of gaining access to and measuring real-life, face-to-face, buyer–seller interactions. Accordingly, we were not able to conduct statistical tests, and our analysis was limited to the calculation and evaluation of means. Although the data intimate behavioral patterns and/or differences among the exchange participants (parties), the relative effect (i.e., strength) of these differences remains unknown. Similarly, we were precluded from conducting more sophisticated analyses that would have potentially allowed us to present a more accurate depiction of the interactions. The results, however, seem to be directionally correct and generally

consistent with prior predictions, and, to this end, we feel that they represent a useful starting point from which future research might be developed.

Directions for Future Research

Future research in this area might begin by examining the dynamic ordering or timing of some of the behavioral variables examined herein. For example, it could be that friendliness tends to be more prevalent at the beginning of a meeting, as an opening prelude to the discussion of substantive topics. During the course of the meeting, question asking and disagreements may become more pervasive, with compliance playing a larger role as the meeting closes. Research along these lines would likely provide greater insight into the nature of interpersonal communication strategies and processes of both buyers and sellers.

Another research direction deserving attention involves identifying various moderating and mediating variables in the communication/interaction process. As mentioned above, there are likely many variables that moderate and/or mediate the association between relationship quality and communication behavior, such as individual buyer–seller personalities and various aspects of the marketing environment.

Last, an important direction for future research would be to verify some of the extant conceptualizations of buyer–seller interactions empirically. For example, Williams, Spiro, and Fine's (1990) conceptualization distinguishes among three types of orientation in communication: task-, interaction-, and self-orientation. Perhaps these three orientations are manifest differentially in buyer–seller interactions according to level of relationship quality.

Implications for Management

From a managerial standpoint, the present findings suggest that sales and purchasing managers would do well to begin educating their staffs as to the potential effects of buyer–seller, communicative behavior. El-Ansary (1993), for example, recently argued that sales training content should include more material pertaining to interpersonal communication. By understanding the behaviors associated with varying levels of relationship quality and outcomes of exchange, buyers and sellers would be better attuned to the subtle behaviors of their exchange partners and positioned to elicit positive exchanges and avoid less productive encounters. For instance, sellers cognizant of this information would likely interpret decreases in buyer talking and question-asking behavior very differently compared with those who were unaware of the behavioral manifestations of direct, face-to-face interactions.

The purpose of this study was to raise the question of how relationship marketing is enacted along the boundaries of an organization, or, how relationship marketing is manifested in face-to-face interactions among channel members. We approach this issue by considering the relationship quality con-

text within which an interaction occurs, and speculating on how relationship marketing might be differentially enacted across varying relational contexts. We explore how relationship marketing is manifest potentially in terms of a number of commonly displayed communicative/behavioral variables. The results point to interesting behavior patterns between buyers and sellers involved in relationships of varying degrees of relationship quality. To this end, the study extends the field's current knowledge of relationship marketing and hopefully serves as a stimulant to additional thought and research in this important area of marketing communications.

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