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## Identifying New Innovations in Diverse B-to-B Sales Meetings

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the paper is to study the role of b-to-b sales meetings and related social media in the innovation process. The paper combines literature on innovation with customers and value co-creation in b-to-b sales. The study employed a qualitative case study approach and used qualitative data collected from four buyer and four seller interviews. The interviewed buyers sent a contact request to the seller through the Internet. The paper discusses the types of and routes for ideas that have emerged in sales meetings, as well as the use of these ideas. The results show that the interaction between the buyer and the seller provides rich knowledge and ideas for new innovations, and these ideas are triggered by both the salesperson and the customer. However, these ideas may not be used further in the organizations.

**Keywords:** innovation development; customer involvement; social media; b-to-b sales; innovation; b-to-b marketing; Service-Dominant Logic; value co-creation; open innovation

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### 1 Introduction

Product and service providers have started to open their innovation processes, involving their customers in various phases of innovation and co-creating value with them. Customers may be active ideas generators, and assist in developing prototypes and testing early launches. Customers may also configure existing products and evaluate the commerciality of innovations, etc. In other words, customers may have different roles in the innovation process. Several researchers have studied the customer perspective in innovation (see, e.g., von Hippel, 2005; Chesbrough, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). For example, service-dominant logic (see, e.g., Vargo and Lusch, 2004) approaches the theme from a marketing perspective and open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003, 2006, 2011) from an innovation process perspective. However, these previous studies do not put enough emphasis on the role of sales meetings in innovation development. This raises

an interesting question: *What is the role of b-to-b sales meetings and related social media in the innovation process?*

Digitalization – i.e. virtual meetings and other social media channels – is changing customer behaviour and the nature of sales meetings. Thus, social media could be one powerful tool in obtaining customer insights into b-to-b sales and the customer voice from sales to innovation development. As digitalization brings diversity to sales meetings, an interesting viewpoint is how this will appear in the innovation process.

This paper will build on service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and open innovation (Chesbrough, 2006) in studying the role of diverse b-to-b sales meetings – face-to-face, virtual and through other social media channels – in the innovation process. Based on the results, the paper will help companies to understand the opportunities of buyer-seller interaction as a resource in their innovation process. Thus, the purpose of the paper is to combine literature in the field of innovation with customers and value co-creation in b-to-b sales.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, the literature review discusses innovation with customers, and value-based selling and sales meetings in b-to-b companies. Secondly, the research question and methodology are presented. Central empirical findings from the interview study are described in the subsequent section, followed by the discussion and conclusions.

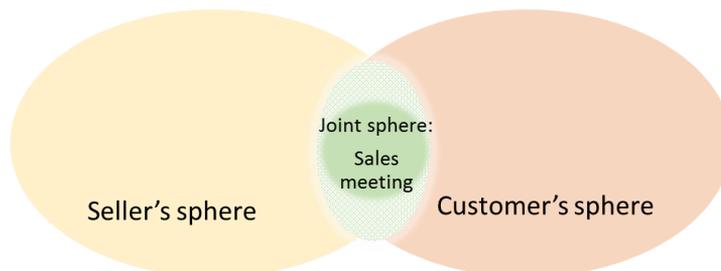
## **2 Theoretical background**

### *Innovation with customers*

In the literature on innovation management, there are two main concepts to describe innovation with customers: the concept of user innovation (von Hippel, 2005) and the concept of open innovation (Chesbrough, 2006). The concept of user innovation was based on real life situations in which individual consumers were involved in designing high-end products that would satisfy their needs. Much of the user innovation theory is also valid in b-to-b markets. The concept of open innovation was born from findings in b-to-b markets where companies were searching for external ideas and technologies to enhance their innovation and for external paths to commercialize their own ideas and technologies. Open innovation can be defined as “a distributed innovation process based on purposively managed knowledge flows across organizational boundaries, using pecuniary and non-pecuniary mechanisms in line with the organization’s business model” (Chesbrough et al., 2014). The open innovation literature addresses the importance of different knowledge flows: 1) leveraging external knowledge sources through internal processes; 2) leveraging internal knowledge through external commercialization; and 3) both aspects together, coupling external knowledge sources and commercialization activities. Digitalization enables leveraging of increasingly distributed knowledge sources and provides new ways to achieve it (Chesbrough et al., 2014).

The change of innovation logic from closed to open is described by the concepts of the user and open innovation. Service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) in the marketing literature also presents a similar change of logic. According to Vargo and Lusch (2004), companies are moving from traditional goods-centred dominant logic (GDL) to service-centred dominant logic (SDL). In GDL, customers are seen as targets,

and they are acted on to create transactions with resources. In SDL, customers are seen as active participants in relational exchanges and coproduction. Grönroos and Voima (2013) have studied SDL and identified three different spheres in which value is actually created, how and by whom (Figure 1). These spheres (provider, joint and customer) categorize the company's and the customer's actions, which can be direct or indirect, and can lead to different forms of value creation and co-creation. In the joint sphere, the dialogical process of direct interaction may emerge as co-created value. The provider may also act as a value facilitator, which is often the case in value-based selling, where the customer's needs may not be clear beforehand and they have to be clarified together. In this paper, we use the term 'seller' rather than 'provider' in order to avoid complexity. The joint sphere in this paper is defined as sales meetings, where digitalization, i.e. digital channels and social media, brings diversity and blurs the meaning of the sales meeting from a traditional face-to-face meeting to diverse communication between the seller and the customer via different kinds of channels.



**Figure 1** Sales meetings as a platform for new innovations (modified from Grönroos and Voima, 2013)

The connection between the main theories of innovation and customers (von Hippel, 2005; Chesbrough, 2003) and service-dominant logic is found in the fact that both approaches call for interaction with customers in innovation and the importance of knowledge in the interaction (Paasi et al., 2014). In the early open innovation literature, the bidirectional flow of tacit knowledge that is typical of real co-creation was not a subject (Chesbrough, 2003; Lichtenthaler and Lichtenthaler, 2009). Instead, recent literature on open innovation addresses the importance of co-creation and the bidirectional flow of knowledge (Chesbrough, 2011; Paasi et al., 2010) and, thus, is in accordance with SDL. In SDL, the primary units of exchange are knowledge and skills. Furthermore, SDL talks about the transaction of solutions in the provider-customer interaction, where customers are seen as co-creators of value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000) and the co-creation should cover the whole innovation process from ideation to execution (Russo-Spena and Mele, 2012). In the open innovation literature, the external knowledge source for innovation is not only the customer but also other sources in the business environment – for example, suppliers, competitors, universities, networks, communities and innovation contests (West and Bogers, 2013; Chesbrough et al., 2014). Thus, internal company knowledge sources are important.

In this paper, sales meetings, the joint sphere, are presented as platforms for generating ideas for new innovations, as salespersons obtain a wealth of knowledge from customers during the discussions. At the same time, salespersons share ideas with their

customers in their sales work. However, in order to use the ideas from the sales meetings, the route of those ideas for further development and execution in the selling organization requires the understanding of the intermediate role of salespersons (Kallio and Bergenholz, 2011). Corsten and Felde (2005) demonstrate that supplier collaboration has a positive effect on buyer performance both in terms of innovative capability and financial results, whereas trust and dependence play an important role in supplier relationships.

### *Value-based selling and diverse sales meetings in b-to-b companies*

In value-based selling, the focus is more on the offering’s implications for the customer’s business and less on the customer’s actual, expressed needs. It follows that the benefits of the existing offering are not primary discussion topics but the understanding of the customer’s forthcoming business challenges and new competitive advantages to proactively enhance the customer’s success in future (Terho et al., 2012). According to the definition by Kaario et al. (2003, 9) “the selling of value is about selling – not products, services, solutions but – business impacts that result in increased profits for the customer”. This may be actualized through diverse paths, either developing the existing way of operating (cf. incremental innovations) or developing a completely new innovation (cf. radical innovations) but at the same time reflecting on which stages the value is created at and where the most important value-creating sources are at each stage (Töytäri et al., 2011).

In value-based selling, the quantification of value and understanding from both the seller’s and the buyer’s perspective is important (Töytäri et al., 2011). This requires both the customer and the salesperson to be active participants in the two-way communication mapping the customer’s value creation potential (cf. Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Sales meetings have traditionally been the forums for communication between salespersons and customers. It is also suggested that the salesperson’s social media activity has an impact on information communication behaviours, especially the salesperson’s responsiveness and customer satisfaction based on it (Agnihotri et al., 2016).

There is active discussion in academia about the concept of value co-creation. Grönroos and Voima (2013) have criticized Vargo and Lusch (2006; 2008) and argue that value can be co-created only in direct, personal interaction between the provider (seller) and the beneficiary (customer) – in other situations, the seller is only capable of facilitating value creation in the customer’s sphere. Ballantyne and Varey (2008) have criticized the integration of value co-creation and value co-production as they argue that value co-creation is based on new ideas that emerge in dialogue and interaction with the parties, as value co-production means operating with existing resources and knowledge. Vargo and Lusch (2016, 9) underline in their response to Grönroos and Voima (2013) that value is not created between single actors, or even between a firm and its customer, but “among the whole host of actors” and “through interaction of resources, provided by many sources”.

B-to-b sales meetings are traditionally only appreciated in the selling organization according to monetary value appropriation. Sales meetings are also forums for communicating value propositions to customers (Anderson et al., 2007). The building of customer relationships and customer lifetime value (CLV) are today acceptable in evaluating the salesperson’s performance (Blocker et al., 2012). Some other non-monetary aspects of value, such as joint learning, dialogue, identifying and acting on

opportunities, are suggested as being part of the value co-creation (Payne et al., 2008). However, digitalization has transformed b-to-b customers' behaviours, and it is more challenging for the salesperson to gain access to a face-to-face meeting in the early phases of the buying process (Adamson et al., 2012). On the other hand, social media tools can provide an alternative method for communication, enable faster and more personalized interaction between the buyer and the seller, and, thus, enhance corporate credibility and deepen relationships (Andzulis et al., 2012).

Several benefits have been seen for b-to-b companies that use social media (Jussila et al., 2014). However, only a few authors have studied the influence of social media, especially on the sales process. For example, Andzulis et al. (2012) emphasized that social media is different for different customers and companies, providing an alternative method for communication. Nevertheless, salespersons are in a prime position to anticipate customers' future desires (Blocker et al., 2012), which may play a critical role in value appropriation, e.g. in the recognition of new innovations.

Traditionally, the organizational functions, like R&D, sales and marketing, have been separated and have department-specific goals (Luo et al., 2006). However, the need for market orientation of a firm is well accepted in both academia and practice. Gathering information from customers and competitors, and disseminating the knowledge through the organization and using it in marketing (Atuahene-Gima, 2005; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Narver and Slater, 1990), and innovation processes are highlighted in the literature (Gonzales-Zapatero et al., 2016).

### **3 Research question and methodology**

Customer involvement in innovation as a phenomenon is probably as old an issue as the exchange of goods within civilizations. However, previous studies do not put enough emphasis on the role of diverse b-to-b sales meetings in the innovation process. In this paper, the main research question of the study is

*What is the role of b-to-b sales meetings and related social media in the innovation process?*

The research methodology employed in this paper is a qualitative case study. The case study was chosen as a method because it is suitable for situations that include complex and multiple variables and processes (Yin, 2014). Our case data are collected from two semi-structured theme interview rounds during the winter 2015-2016.

- Round 1, Seller view: Digitalization and innovation in b-to-b sales meetings
- Round 2, Buyer view: Digitalization and innovation in b-to-b buying processes

In round 1, the interviews involved four sellers from two large companies representing interior and security industries operating in b-to-b markets. The interviewees were sales representatives and their sales managers. The interview themes included the use of digitalization and social media in sales, challenges of the sales, leads from the Internet, innovation in sales meetings, co-operation with customers and company R&D. The interviewed companies are case companies in the research project behind this study, thus enabling tight co-operation and providing detailed information along the way.

In round 2, the focus was on buyers' viewpoints, and altogether four buyers from four companies were interviewed, representing various sizes and industries (shipbuilding,

printing, facility services and machine manufacturing industries). The interviewed buyers were selected because they were interested in the round 1 companies’ offerings and had sent a contact request through the Internet. The interviews went beyond innovation in sales meetings to cover a broad range of themes, such as the use of digital channels and social media in buying, challenges of the buying process and co-operation with the R&D function.

The duration of a typical interview was about 1-2 hours, and each one involved one or two interviewers. Semi-structured theme interviews were chosen as the main source of the empirical material because the study was explorative in nature and the various meanings of the concepts needed to be negotiated with the interviewees. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewers also made their own notes.

## 4 Results

### *The triggers for innovation*

As earlier studies have revealed, the trigger for innovation may not only come from internal paths but also from external knowledge sources, whereas customers are important triggers for new innovations. However, previous studies have not put enough emphasis on the role of sales meetings in the innovation process. The focus in this study was therefore on exploring sales meetings as potential innovation platforms. The results show that sales meetings boost ideation of new innovations and that the triggers may come from several routes.

The customer may bring up unsolved problems or seeds for an innovation in discussion with the salesperson in the meeting. Triggers are often based on the customer’s customers’ problems or changing needs. To find a solution to this challenge, the customer’s buyer may raise the unsolved problem to the salesperson.

“Our salespeople discuss with our customers and we try to develop features that will meet their changed needs.”

However, the customer’s need to succeed in competitive markets may also start based on internal triggers for acting in new ways, such as the need to improve performance or achieve savings in the cost structure. These needs also act as triggers in the sales meetings from the customer’s side to find new ways to enhance its business, as one of the buyers described:

“The processes we previously carried out manually need to be developed to become more effective and efficient. We will then start to develop a new way of doing it and to discuss the opportunities the suppliers can offer. Such machines don’t exist as such – they have to be created for us.”

The external changing environment also acts as a trigger for new ways of acting or creating completely new innovations, as one of the customer’s described:

“These days the auditors also given more advice than before, e.g. how to develop our operations according to the changing environmental norms.”

According to the results, buyers also search for new ideas on the Internet. For example, one buyer searched for new ideas on the Internet and was upset about the fact that the familiar seller had not provided all the knowledge about its latest innovations and he only found it on the Internet. Another buyer searched for best practices from other industries on the Internet and in magazines. Some sellers also followed old classmates from other industries on the Internet and thus searched for best practices.

### *Ideas from b-t-b sales meetings*

The results show that in sales meetings, ideas are triggered by the salesperson as well as the customer. Some of the ideas and contents of discussions represented positive associations, according to the customer's comments. As one of the approaches to the concept of value is the trade-off between benefits and sacrifices (Flint and Woodruff, 2001), some of the ideas for innovations also included benefits and sacrifices in the evaluation of the potential value by the customers. However, some of the ideas represented more negative associations according to the customer's comments, thus some threats or sacrifices were mentioned that may hinder the innovation process.

Positive and beneficial issues for innovation included mapping the new opportunities to update the buyer's competence or learning through the best practices that the salesperson presented from other industries or companies. Real contacts from the salesperson's networks also offered paths to new opportunities for innovations to the customer. One of the positive opportunities was the testing procedures that were executed at the customer's premises. These were seen as positive from the image point of view. One buyer clarified this:

“We are known as a producer of high quality, and we have invested a lot in the diverse manufacturing machinery. That's the reason the material producers' testers visited us, and we have cooperated.”

These testing procedures also resulted in efficiency in the customer's operations and gave the exclusive right to the new solution to the focal customer. In this case, the co-creation of value for both the provider, in developing new offerings, and the customer was an example of co-creation of value for both parties in an innovation process.

In many cases, the critical feature of the quick progress with the innovation was the opportunity to turn the innovation into monetary value as soon as possible. This indicated that customers were calculating the benefits and costs of the salesperson's idea before proceeding. The evaluation of the benefits and the salesperson's ability to show the value in euros were critical. However, the comparisons between the existing way of acting and the new opportunity and the investments that should be made had an effect on the decision to proceed. As the sacrifices for the opportunities were evaluated, the product life cycle also played an important role for some of the customers. Performing these calculations between the new and the old way was mentioned as challenging, and some kind of calculation tool that could be available on the Internet was on the customer's wish list to help make the decision.

Customers indicated opportunities as well as threats for several innovation ideas, in addition to the benefits and cost calculations. Technological development was mentioned as having pros and cons: it offered advances but also required some caution when adopting the latest technology. One of the reasons for the prejudice was lack of experience.

The supplier’s investments in the relationship and development projects were also seen as both positive and negative, as the customer did not want to be bound to or be too dependent on one supplier. The main threat in this was the power of the supplier to raise prices later on. One of the concerns of the buyer was the involvement of the management in the innovation process, which was described as follows:

“If there is clear proof of the growing amount of euros, there is no problem in proceeding with the idea inside the company. But if the proof of increased revenue is not clear, it would be good if the persons at management level were involved in the innovation process.”

It is also important that the salesperson’s proposed ideas are implemented quickly enough. If the process takes too long, there is a loss of interest. The customers were also concerned about the intellectual property rights (IPR), especially in radical innovations, as one of the buyers indicated:

“The question is who owns the rights to the innovation.”

According to the interviews, there was diversity in co-operation closeness between the buyer/seller and its own R&D functions. Some of interviewees mentioned that there was daily information exchange. Others said that it was on a monthly or an on demand basis. Thus, this level of knowledge exchange affects the utilization of new ideas that emerge from the sales meetings inside the company. The interviewed sellers also emphasized the importance of personal chemistry in communications. The role of the salespersons may be challenging in the organization. They may be seen as an important route for hearing the customer’s voice. However, it may be difficult for them to get their voice heard on new innovations. Some good experiences were mentioned with service designers who were active links between buyers, sellers and R&D.

Based on the interview results, the Internet helps the buyer and seller search for knowledge and prepare for sales meetings. LinkedIn was mentioned as an important source of knowledge. Virtual meetings are not widely used. Face-to-face meetings were preferred, after which virtual meetings could be used. The combination of virtual and face-to-face meetings has not been widely used. One buyer mentioned that it had taken a video connection for its R&D from a sales meeting.

## **5 Discussion**

The aim of this study was to create a deeper and holistic understanding of the role of diverse b-to-b sales meetings in the innovation process. Based on the results, b-to-b sales meetings are seen as fruitful sources for new innovations. The results suggest that new innovations emerge bidirectionally in sales meetings, as both the salesperson and the customer may act as initiator to open the discussions for new ideas. The results are therefore in accordance with previous studies of Vargo and Lusch (2004; 2016), Grönroos and Voima (2013), Chesbrough (2011) and Paasi et al. (2010) because the base for new innovations is created bidirectionally and the co-creation aspect is strong. The new value will not be co-created if the buyer and the seller do not meet each other. Informal discussions between the salesperson and the customer’s representative (buyer) are mentioned as fruitful. According to the interviews, digitalization has not yet shifted these aspects of the sales meetings to the Internet.

Figure 2 summarizes the results and presents the routes for new innovations emerging from both sides – the seller’s side and the customer’s side but also from their business up-stream and down-stream value chain.

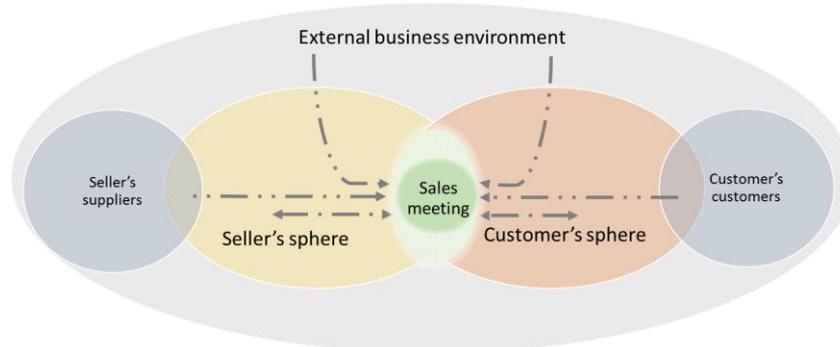


Figure 2 Sales meetings as a platform for new innovations – the triggers

When the seller’s representative (salesperson) and the customer’s representative (buyer) meet in a sales meeting, they can both present new ideas for future innovations. According to the results, the triggers from the customer’s sphere may arise from three main sources: 1) its customers; 2) inside its organization; and 3) the external business environment. The results show that the triggers from the seller’s sphere may also arise from three main sources: 1) its suppliers’ new inventions, which the salesperson suggests in the sales meetings should be adapted to the focal customer’s business; 2) new ideas emerging from inside its organization; and 3) the external business environment. These findings are in accordance with the ideology of open innovation (Chesbrough, 2006, 2014), as the triggers for new innovations also come from external sources. Thus, when the focus is more on value-based sales than traditional transaction sales, the customers are seen more as active participants (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). For example, tenders are created more in interaction between the seller and the customer when the focus is on value-based selling. The results are in accordance with Töytäri et al. (2011), while participants in the sales meeting are active, and bidirectional communication is important. In value-based selling the communication is a very important aspect.

The results show that triggers for new innovations emerge from sales meetings and that digitalization boosts the knowledge of buyers and seller before face-to-face meetings. However, there are several challenges. According to the interview results, the role of the salesperson and the buyer in the innovation process may not be clear (Kallio and Bergenholz, 2011) and the communication inside the seller’s sphere or the customer’s sphere may vary. For example, the communication between the buyer/seller and R&D may not be planned organizationally and it varies from a daily to an on demand basis. Personal chemistry and activeness therefore affect communication. These aspects may originate from the fact that companies are divided into different kinds of silos, affecting the communication between them (Luo et al. 2006). In addition, the interviews show that one of the critical points in developing the ideas further based on discussions with the salesperson is the need for ideas to be translated into monetary terms, which is in line with value-based selling literature in which, for instance, Terho et al. (2012, 178) presented the need to “convincingly demonstrating their contribution to customers’ profitability”. These viewpoints affect the speed of the innovation process and may also

lead to the many fruitful ideas and co-created value remaining in the joint sphere forever. Fast exchange of knowledge is important in order to stay ahead of the competition.

According to the results, the nature of b-to-b sales meetings has not yet changed significantly because of digitalization. Some of the sales discussions are held through virtual meetings, especially after first meeting face to face. The combination of face-to-face meetings and virtual tools is not used very often. However, the role of digitalization is mostly about the amount of knowledge that the buyer and seller have about each other and their offering or needs before the actual sales meeting. According to the interviews, buyers are increasingly searching for information on the Internet, and they would like to make more comparisons of features and prices before the meeting. These aspects are in accordance with Blocker et al. (2012), while the salesperson is still in a prime position to anticipate the customer’s future desires.

## 6 Conclusions

The trend towards value-based selling and co-creation of value with customers may promote recognition of new innovations. Sales discussions are transforming from traditional transaction selling to listening to the customers more closely and co-creating an applied solution with them. In this study, we sought answers to the question: *What is the role of b-to-b sales meetings and related social media in the innovation process?* Empirical findings on customer interaction in b-to-b sales in the literature have focused on customer relationships, customer value or monetary value for the selling company. Only a few papers combine innovation and sales meetings, and even fewer are concerned with the role of social media in this interface. This paper combines literature on innovation with customers and value co-creation in b-to-b sales and gives practical viewpoints on the recognition of new innovations in sales meetings. Thus, the paper puts special emphasis on the digitalization aspects of sales meetings.

The study used qualitative data that were collected from two interview rounds. In the first interview round, four sellers from two companies were interviewed, and in the second one, four buyers from four different companies who had sent a contact request through the Internet were interviewed. The paper discusses what kinds of ideas arise in sales meetings and what their routes are as well as how these ideas are used. According to the results, the interaction between the buyer and the seller provides many unexploited resources for new innovation development. These new ideas are triggered by both the buyer and the seller. However, the challenge lies in the fact that innovation aspects are just a small by-product of the current roles of the buyer and the seller, leading to these ideas maybe not being used further in the organizations and, thus, becoming stuck in the joint sphere.

Our explorative study with a small sample only scratches the surface, but it opens several interesting paths to take in the future. More in-depth studies are needed to understand the state of the art as well as how digitalization could boost innovation in sales meetings, further use of these ideas, as well as the communication between the buyer/seller and its R&D functions. The use of the buyer and seller in the innovation process could be better organized. For example, organizing regular meetings between buyers/sellers and R&D, or providing an ideas box on the Internet for new ideas that emerge in sales meeting may provide valuable results.

The effects of digitalization are currently mainly in the amount of knowledge the buyer and the seller have about each other and the business environment. In the future, virtual meetings and other social media channels may reduce communication between the salesperson and the customer. On the other hand, they may bring the salespersons and customers closer through more instant and faster communication. Thus, fast communication may help when discussing new ideas more closely and when testing them.

The paper is intended to help practitioners to benchmark practices in other companies and to give feedback to managers to develop customer involvement and innovation management, including the perspective of b-to-b sales meetings, successfully in practice. This paper will also help researchers to see the management of customer involvement in innovation in a broader context, including from the b-to-b sales perspective.

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