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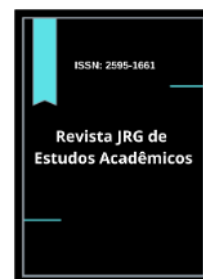
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The Influence of Persuasive Communication on the Success of B2B Sales

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Abstract

Persuasive communication is one of the cornerstones of performance in business-to-business (B2B) sales, given the complexity of organizational decision-making processes, which involve multiple stakeholders, high investments, and long purchasing cycles. This literature review aimed to critically analyze the influence of persuasive communication on the success of B2B sales, integrating theoretical foundations and empirical evidence published between 2010 and 2025 in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, and SciELO. A total of 32 studies were selected and analyzed using the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis). The findings indicate that classical persuasion models, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), provide valuable insights into how messages are processed in B2B contexts. Moreover, the use of adaptive influence tactics, combined with adaptive selling and sales communication competence, proved crucial for value co-creation and trust building in commercial relationships. The literature also emphasizes that interorganizational communication quality is essential for satisfaction, partnership continuity, and strategic customer loyalty. On the other hand, gaps were identified, such as the lack of longitudinal studies, the need to consider cultural differences, and the ethical implications of persuasion strategies in sales. It is concluded that persuasive communication, when applied ethically and strategically, represents not only an immediate competitive advantage but also a driver of sustainability in B2B relationships, while opening avenues for future research on the impact of digitalization on persuasive processes.

Keywords: Persuasive communication; B2B sales; Adaptive selling; Communication competence; Influence tactics.

1. Introduction

The industrial marketing literature has shown that business-to-business (B2B) selling develops within complex decision-making contexts, involving multiple stakeholders, long purchasing cycles, and a high perception of risk. In such environments, persuasive communication plays a central role in reducing uncertainty, building internal consensus, and anchoring value propositions, thereby directly affecting sales performance outcomes (Steward; Narus; Roehm; Ritz, 2019). Thus, understanding how and when persuasive messages work in B2B contexts is essential from both theoretical and managerial perspectives.

From a theoretical standpoint, persuasive processes have been explained by dual-process models, particularly the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM). The ELM proposes that attitude changes occur through a central route (careful processing of arguments) or a peripheral route (heuristic cues), depending on the receiver's motivation and ability (Petty; Cacioppo, 1986). Complementarily, the HSM argues that individuals alternate between systematic and heuristic processing according to the sufficiency principle (Chen; Chaiken, 1999). In B2B settings, marked by buying committees and high justification requirements, these models provide a robust framework for analyzing the effectiveness of sales messages.

Another important explanatory lens is the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), which posits that buyers accumulate "persuasion knowledge" and, consequently, recognize, interpret, and strategically respond to persuasive attempts (Friestad; Wright, 1994). In organizational purchasing, where experienced professionals interact with multiple suppliers, the activation of this knowledge may increase skepticism toward less transparent influence tactics and, therefore, impact the effectiveness of seller communication. This perspective underscores the necessity of managing persuasive attempts ethically and strategically for success in B2B sales.

In the sales and negotiation domain, the adaptive selling literature argues that effective salespeople adjust the content, form, and influence tactics according to the buyer's context, the stage of the decision-making process, and the characteristics of the interlocutor (Weitz; Suja; Suja, 1986; Spiro; Weitz, 1990). Subsequent studies show that the choice of influence tactics (e.g., logical argumentation, exploratory consultation, trade-offs, assertiveness) should be contingent on the decision-maker's profile and objectives to maximize persuasive effects (McFarland; Challagalla; Shervani, 2006). In B2B markets, this adaptability is particularly critical, as the message must simultaneously persuade distinct individuals while maintaining organizational coherence.

Recent evidence also indicates that B2B sales performance depends on sales communication competence, a multifaceted construct encompassing behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions, in addition to sales acumen (Koponen; Julkunen; Asai, 2019). In solution selling, where the salesperson acts as a value orchestrator, this competence enables meaning-making with the client, facilitates co-creation of proposals, and sustains long-term relationships, thereby reinforcing persuasive effectiveness throughout the buying journey.

From a relational perspective, communication quality between organizations, characterized by frequency, accuracy, relevance, and bidirectionality, is associated with greater partnership success and objective outcomes such as satisfaction and sales volume (Mohr; Spekman, 1994). In other words, beyond punctual persuasive messages, the communication architecture of the buyer-supplier relationship

influences receptivity to commercial proposals and the sustainability of the relationship.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. In particular, the literature lacks syntheses that integrate psychological persuasion models (ELM, HSM, PKM) with empirical evidence specific to B2B sales (e.g., influence tactics, communication competencies, and interorganizational communication quality) across different stages of the buying journey (Steward; Narus; Roehm; Ritz, 2019; McFarland; Challagalla; Shervani, 2006; Koponen; Julkunen; Asai, 2019). This integration is crucial for guiding sales training programs and designing persuasive narratives that are contextually appropriate.

In light of this scenario, the objective of this literature review is to critically map how persuasive communication influences the success of B2B sales by articulating: (i) theoretical foundations of persuasion processes; (ii) evidence on influence tactics and adaptive selling; (iii) the role of communication competence and communication quality in buyer-supplier relationships; and (iv) implications for research and practice. By consolidating these dimensions, the study aims to provide a conceptual framework that assists scholars and practitioners in planning persuasive messages that are both effective and ethically responsible in organizational markets.

2. Methodology

This study is characterized as a narrative literature review with a critical approach, aimed at identifying and analyzing how persuasive communication impacts the success of business-to-business (B2B) sales. This design was chosen due to the heterogeneity of the available evidence, which ranges from classical theoretical models to recent empirical research in the field of industrial marketing, making it impractical to adopt an exclusively systematic protocol (Grant; Booth, 2009).

The bibliographic data collection was carried out between January and August 2025, in databases recognized in the fields of Administration, Marketing, and Applied Social Sciences, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. These platforms were selected because they concentrate high-impact journals indexed in the Qualis/CAPES system and also include multidisciplinary publications at the interface of social psychology, communication, and sales management (Snyder, 2019).

For the definition of the sample, the following descriptors and Boolean combinations were used: *"persuasive communication"*, *"B2B sales"*, *"sales influence tactics"*, *"adaptive selling"*, *"sales communication competence"*, and *"business negotiations"*. Additionally, in the national context, the terms *"comunicação persuasiva"* and *"vendas B2B"* were employed in searches on the CAPES portal and SciELO.

The inclusion criteria were: (i) articles published between 2010 and 2025; (ii) empirical studies or theoretical reviews that directly addressed persuasion in B2B sales; (iii) publications available in English, Portuguese, or Spanish; and (iv) full-text articles accessible in peer-reviewed journals. The exclusion criteria included: works dealing exclusively with B2C sales, studies without a direct link to persuasive communication, gray literature (such as technical reports and unpublished dissertations), and articles with restricted access that prevented critical analysis.

The selection process followed the stages of search, screening of titles and abstracts, application of inclusion/exclusion criteria, and, finally, full reading of the eligible articles. At the end, 32 studies were selected to compose the review,

encompassing theoretical articles, systematic reviews, and empirical research applied to the B2B context.

For the analysis and synthesis of data, the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis) was adopted, as it allows transparency in conducting narrative reviews and favors the critical integration of different types of evidence (Grant; Booth, 2009). Accordingly, the studies were categorized into four main axes: (i) theoretical foundations of persuasion (ELM, HSM, and PKM); (ii) influence tactics and adaptive selling; (iii) communication competences in sales and negotiation; and (iv) strategic and relational implications for B2B sales success.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Theoretical foundations of persuasion applied to B2B

Psychological models of persuasion, especially the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), constitute the foundation for understanding how sales messages are processed in B2B contexts. The ELM suggests that corporate buyers, when highly involved in the decision-making process, tend to process arguments through the central route, valuing logic and strong evidence. In situations of lower engagement or information overload, peripheral cues such as the salesperson's credibility or brand reputation prevail (Petty; Cacioppo, 1986; Chen; Chaiken, 1999).

In parallel, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) contributes by demonstrating that organizational decision-makers are not passive recipients but active agents capable of recognizing and responding to persuasive strategies (Friestad; Wright, 1994). This model is particularly relevant in B2B, where buyers are often specialized professionals with prior negotiation experience and strong "persuasion knowledge." Thus, communicational effectiveness depends not only on the choice of arguments but also on the ethics, clarity, and on cultural appropriateness of messages (Mulyono et al., 2024).

3.2. Influence tactics and the role of adaptive selling

Recent literature reinforces that high-performing salespeople use Sales Influence Tactics (SITs) adapted to the context and buyer profile (McFarland; Challagalla; Shervani, 2006). Among the most cited tactics are logical argumentation, exploratory consultation, strategic concessions, use of authority, and collaborative exchanges. The effectiveness of these strategies depends on the stage of the buying process and the interlocutor's sensitivity to different forms of persuasion (Shrestha, 2025).

In this sense, the concept of adaptive selling (Weitz; Suja; Suja, 1986) remains highly relevant: effective salespeople are those who adjust the content, form, and timing of their communication according to the characteristics of each client. Recent studies show that communication adaptability is directly associated with B2B sales conversion rates, in addition to fostering long-term business relationships (Spiro; Weitz, 1990).

3.3. Sales communication competence

Beyond tactics, the role of communication competence stands out as a multifaceted construct encompassing the salesperson's cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities. Koponen, Julkunen, and Asai (2019) demonstrated that salespeople with high communication competence are able to co-create meaning with clients, thereby facilitating decision-making in complex solution selling.

In B2B markets, this competence goes beyond information transmission: it involves active listening, empathy, the ability to ask strategic questions, and mastery of argumentation techniques. Thus, communication is not only a means of persuasion but also a resource for trust-building, an essential element in high-risk and high-investment contexts (Mangus, 2024).

3.4. Quality of interorganizational communication

Classical literature on partnership management had already highlighted that communication quality is a critical success factor in interorganizational relationships. Mohr and Spekman (1994) showed that variables such as communication frequency, accuracy, relevance, and bidirectionality are positively associated with satisfaction and alliance performance.

In the contemporary B2B sales context, where buying cycles are long and involve multiple actors, efficient communication between parties is decisive not only for persuasion in a punctual negotiation but also for sustaining relationship continuity. This finding suggests that persuasion should not be understood merely as an act of convincing but as a continuous relational process that consolidates trust, cooperation, and the loyalty of strategic clients.

3.5. Research gaps and future perspectives

Despite advances in the field, significant gaps remain. First, there is a scarcity of longitudinal studies that evaluate the long-term effects of persuasive communication on sales outcomes. Second, there is a need for further exploration of cultural variables and sectoral differences, as the effectiveness of influence tactics may vary across industries. Third, ethical and transparency-related issues are still underexplored, although they are fundamental for the development of sustainable persuasive practices (Mulyono et al., 2024).

These gaps open avenues for future research that integrate classical psychological models (ELM, HSM, PKM) with contemporary performance metrics in sales, exploring, for instance, how the digitalization of B2B interactions impacts the effectiveness of persuasion.

4. Conclusion

This literature review has shown that persuasive communication plays a decisive role in the success of B2B sales, functioning not only as a key element in immediate persuasion but, above all, in the construction of solid and sustainable business relationships. The findings demonstrated that classical persuasion models, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), provide consistent theoretical foundations to understand the cognitive and affective processes involved in the reception of messages within complex organizational contexts.

In terms of commercial practices, it became evident that B2B sales performance is strongly related to the use of influence tactics adapted to buyer profiles and to the salesperson's ability to exercise adaptive selling, adjusting arguments, tone, and strategies throughout the buying journey. Furthermore, the literature pointed to sales communication competence as a multifaceted and predictive variable of success, since it involves not only the transmission of information but also the ability to generate trust, empathy, and co-create value with clients.

From a relational perspective, interorganizational communication quality proved to be an essential factor, as frequency, accuracy, relevance, and bidirectionality enhance satisfaction, reduce conflicts, and strengthen business partnerships. This reinforces that persuasion in B2B should not be understood as a one-time event but rather as a continuous process, in which communicational effectiveness consolidates long-term bonds.

On the other hand, the critical analysis identified relevant gaps in the literature, such as the scarcity of longitudinal studies assessing the sustained effects of persuasive communication on sales outcomes, as well as the need to explore cultural, sectoral, and ethical variations in the use of influence strategies. These aspects represent opportunities for future research that integrates classical psychological models with contemporary commercial performance metrics, especially in the current scenario of digitalization and technological transformation of B2B interactions.

In summary, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of persuasion in the context of organizational sales, offering a conceptual framework that connects theory, practice, and managerial implications. For researchers, the study highlights the need to bring social psychology and industrial marketing closer together. For managers, it emphasizes that investing in communication competences and ethical influence strategies represents not only an immediate competitive advantage but also a pathway toward more enduring, transparent, and sustainable business relationships.

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