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## The relationship sales process in VUCA times – theoretical aspects (Part 1)

## Proces sprzedaży relacyjnej w czasach VUCA – aspekty teoretyczne (Część 1)

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### **Abstract.**

#### ***Research objectives and hypothesis/research questions***

In every enterprise, it is increasingly said that acquiring a new customer is several times more expensive than retaining an existing one. This more or less means that building relationships with customers is often much more important than sales. The pinnacle of success is the transformation of building relationships in the sales process, which is why recently a lot of attention has been paid to developing these skills. The concept of relationship selling hides an entire long-term process, often starting long before meeting a potential customer. Relationship selling is based on the ability to sell services or products based on understanding all the emotional needs of the customer. To learn about the most important needs, the seller must establish a relationship with the customer. Most often, this type of sales is useful in the service segment, such as insurance or investments, where the customer does not see a tangible product at the moment, but the promise of future benefits must be enough for him to make a decision. The aim of the article is to present the results of a critical analysis of the literature on the evolution of the relationship sales process based on the verification of publications in the Scopus and Web of Science databases.

#### ***Research methods***

Critical analysis of domestic and foreign literature on the subject.

#### ***Main results***

As a result of the analysis of the literature on the subject, four approaches to verifying the definition of the relationship sales process were noted: individual sales, which indicates that the beginnings of relationship sales are associated with the traditional, individual sales process; a place of purchase, where the

exchange between the buyer and the seller was not discreet on both sides, and the most important thing was a lasting relationship that should be nurtured at every stage; adaptive selling, i.e. personal selling, focused on identifying the customer's needs and desires; customer focus and modern sales solutions, in line with the general market shift towards a service-based economy and greater customer focus.

#### **Implications for theory and practice**

In terms of the analysis of the definition of relationship sales, it can be noted that in the Polish literature on the subject there are no publications presenting a synthetic description of the evolution of this process, while in the case of implications for practice, this aspect is more limited, however, it indicates the need to change the approach in order to move away from traditional sales to relational in the business sector.

**Keywords:** the relationship sales/selling process, sales transformation, VUCA times

#### **Abstrakt.**

##### **Cel badań i hipotezy/pytania badawcze**

W każdym przedsiębiorstwie coraz częściej mówi się, że pozyskanie nowego klienta jest kilkakrotnie droższe niż utrzymanie obecnego. Oznacza to mniej więcej, że budowanie relacji z klientami jest często dużo ważniejsze niż sprzedaż. Szczytem sukcesu jest transformacja budowania relacji w procesie sprzedaży, dlatego też ostatnio wiele uwagi poświęca się rozwijaniu tych umiejętności. Za koncepcją sprzedaży relacyjnej kryje się cały długofalowy proces, często rozpoczynający się na długo przed spotkaniem z potencjalnym klientem. Sprzedaż relacyjna opiera się na umiejętności sprzedaży usług lub produktów, bazując na zrozumieniu wszelkich emocjonalnych potrzeb klienta. Aby poznać najważniejsze potrzeby klienta, sprzedawca zmuszony jest nawiązać z nim relację. Najczęściej ten rodzaj sprzedaży przydaje się w segmencie usług, takich jak ubezpieczenia czy inwestycje, w przypadku których klient nie widzi w danym momencie wymiernego produktu, ale obietnica przyszłych korzyści musi mu wystarczyć do podjęcia decyzji. Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie wyników krytycznej analizy literatury dotyczącej ewolucji procesu sprzedaży relacyjnej na podstawie weryfikacji publikacji w bazach Scopus i Web of Science.

##### **Metody badawcze**

Krytyczna analiza literatury przedmiotu krajowej i zagranicznej.

##### **Główne wyniki**

W efekcie analizy literatury przedmiotu zauważono cztery podejścia do weryfikacji definicji procesu sprzedaży relacyjnej: sprzedaż indywidualna, która wskazuje, że początki sprzedaży relacyjnej wiążą się z tradycyjnym, indywidualnym procesem sprzedaży; miejsce zakupu, w którym wymiana pomiędzy kupującym i sprzedającym nie była dyskretna z obu stron, a najważniejsza była trwała relacja, którą należy pielęgnować na każdym etapie; sprzedaż adaptacyjna, czyli sprzedaż osobista, nastawiona na identyfikację potrzeb i pragnień klienta; koncentracja na kliencie i nowoczesnych rozwiązaniach sprzedaży, zgodnie z ogólnym przesunięciem rynku w kierunku gospodarki opartej na usługach oraz większej koncentracji na kliencie.

##### **Implikacje dla teorii i praktyki**

W aspekcie analizy definicyjności sprzedaży relacyjnej można zauważyć, iż w polskiej literaturze przedmiotu nie ma publikacji prezentujących w sposób syntetyczny opis ewolucji tego procesu, natomiast w przypadku implikacji dla praktyki ten aspekt jest bardziej ograniczony, jednakże wskazuje na potrzebę zmian podejścia w celu odchodzenia od sprzedaży tradycyjnej do relacyjnej w sektorze biznesowym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** proces sprzedaży relacyjnej, transformacja sprzedaży, czasy VUCA

## **Introduction**

Most organizations focus on single commercial transactions, which is understood as the exchange of a specific good for a certain value of money without maintaining any further contacts with it (transactional sale). However, it should be remembered that relationship marketing introduced some behaviours to the organization based not only on the finalization of individual transactions, but also maintaining

the relationship with the customer for a longer period of time and contacting the seller with the customer after the transaction in order to ensure that the buyer is satisfied with the purchased product (relationship sales). When the seller permanently cooperates with customers, trying to build a trust-based partnership with them and improve their activities, as well as increase their turnover or profits, we speak of partner sales (Nierenberg, 2005, p. 17).

The simplest form of sale is defined as (Wereda, Kowalska, 2021, p. 48):

- The transfer of goods or services to the buyer in accordance with his/her individual value criteria.
- Equivalent exchange of products for other goods.
- A process that can only arise if both sides are equally interested.
- Motivating the client to make a commitment; a situation where the benefits outweigh the fears and uncertainty.

Therefore, in general, the sales process can be defined as a sequence of actions of the seller, aimed at persuading the customer to take the actions desired by that seller. Therefore, the customer's desired activity is usually the purchase of the product (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders, Wong, 2002, p. 48).

In the literature on the subject, there are many divisions and terms of effective sales, which often consists of specific stages (Futrell, 2004, p. 32):

- Customer search (customer acquisition in person as well as through the media).
- Preparation for establishing contact with the customer (a good salesperson is prepared both in terms of content and mentality to talk to the customer).
- Establishing contact (in person, by phone, electronically).
- Product presentation and conversation with the client about what they need.
- Trial closing I (attempt to finalize commercial contact).
- Comments (listening to objections and suggestions from the client).
- Lifting objections (answers to customer questions and an attempt to dispel any doubts).
- Trial closing II (attempt to end the sale with a specific sales behaviour).
- Closing (setting the final terms of sale of the product).
- Finalizing the sale (making a sale transaction).
- After-sales service and keeping in touch with the customer periodically.

In the case of effective sales, well-defined elements of activities in the process of a commercial transaction allow for objective monitoring of performance and its measurement, thus improving the effectiveness and consistency of activities. An important element in long-term sales are lasting relationships and credibility at every stage of sales. Unfortunately, the most common mistake made by sellers in the commercial process is adopting erroneous, top-down assumptions (Cassel, Bird, 2011, p. 75).

In relation to the above information, the condition for a successful sale is to pass all stages, but the most important element is always planning and choosing the most appropriate strategy. The quality of the product itself plays an important role, but also the presentation and unconventional advertising campaign, which must be supported by the sales and negotiation skills of the trader himself/herself (Heller, 2000, p. 32).

Many entrepreneurs, drawing their ideas from economies of scale, build integrated mega-corporations, creating a world of wealth, which gave a picture of the deepening development and economic growth of developed countries. However, the Internet network creates concepts for new economies based on dynamic processes, new business models, new organizational unit value, and especially modern marketing. The emerging concept of the modern business world begins to be based on information, on digital network systems, where new information and information technologies demonstrate an extended impact on efficiency, effectiveness, and the possibility of promoting sustainable economic growth (Krawiec, 2005, p. 11-12). Enterprises in the era of globalization live under the constant pressure of technology. They are forced to modernize practices, which are adapted to the customers' requirements at that time. For large corporations, the implementation of client-company relations with the use of digital technologies is becoming the mainstream of activity (Kannan, 2017, p. 23). It can be pointed out that the most important factor is to use different means to gain clients' interests and create the relationship sales process in enterprises to attract and keep customers for the long time, especially in VUCA<sup>1</sup> times.

## **1. The relationship sales process – the evolution and definitions**

With reference to many authors dealing with sales processes in enterprises, it should be emphasized that it is based on various types of communication between the entity and customers, and especially in modern times it means a long-term and lasting relationship, for which in most cases the direct employee, i.e. the seller, is responsible. Moreover, it is the sales process that is supposed to help the customer buy what he/she expects and meet their needs (Homburg, Workman, Jensen, 2002). In another aspect, modern sales are to focus on three steps, i.e. understanding customer needs, solutions to meet such needs and finally achieving customer satisfaction (Emani, 2015, p. 649). It should be emphasized that the evolution of sales has been taking place for over 50 years, when the sales era began, i.e. after 1970.

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<sup>1</sup> VUCA – an acronym for the words Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous, defining the modern business environment, which, as never before in history, is unstable, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

However, in business and literature, there are also changes in sales terminology (Manning, Reece, 2007). Very often, the seller is now called as an advisor or sales assistant because their role has changed from offering products to creating a sales-oriented orientation, where the customer chooses the product himself/herself, and the bidder, using specific strategies of influence, only helps him/her make a decision (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, Taylor, 2007). Therefore, in sales there is a need to move from the traditional model to the interaction between the seller and the buyer to the relationship-based model. Many authors and business practitioners emphasize that the traditional model indicates a relationship based only on exchange, where the seller tries to encourage customers to make a one-time purchase, because it is profitable for the company at the moment, but when a crisis occurs and there is no relationship, the customer will keep looking. Thus, when the organization aims to deepen the relationship through the exchange process, both sides benefit because the seller will be treated as a friend to the customer. In connection with the entire process, it is in relational sales that a company representative establishes a close and personal relationship with customers, and the organization wins the transaction by gaining their trust (Rigg, 2004). In many respects relationship sales is considered as the operationalization of the marketing concept at the individual level – between the seller and the customer, i.e. as an advisor, he/she is responsible not only for communication, but also for quality, after-sales process, etc. Table 1 presents the basic definitions of relationship sales to illustrate the process.

Another important aspect of presenting the concept of relational selling is the identification of the evolution of this process, which has been presented by many authors in the literature, however, critical verification was presented by Arli, Bauer, Palmatier (2018) who identified four approaches:

- Individual selling, which specifies that the origins of relationship selling involved the traditional, individual selling process, but with a strong emphasis on seller efforts, which expanded to include both seller and buyer aspects.
- The place of purchase where the exchange between the buyer and seller was not discreet on both sides, and the most important thing was the lasting relationship that should be nurtured at every point. As a result of global competition, buyers and sellers are increasingly engaging in joint efforts to reduce costs while maintaining quality.
- Adaptive selling, which is personal selling focused on identifying the customer's needs and desires.
- Customer focus and solution sales, where in line with the overall market shift towards a service economy and greater customer focus, the role of the seller has evolved from partner to value creator.

Table 1. Selected definitions of relational sales in the world literature

Definition	Author
Relationship selling is the operationalization of marketing concept in individual level (seller and customer).	Saxe and Weitz (1982)
Relationship selling changes the selling profession more on solving problems and developing long-term relationships (between buying and selling parties) than it does on selling products regardless of the impact on the customer. Relational selling requires three elements (preparation, persistence, and professionalism), and involves knowing the customer and satisfying customer wants and needs while building mutually beneficial relationships. Other factors include showing appreciation, building friendships, inviting the customers “in-house,” asking questions, performing research, and getting to know the customer as a person. These and the other elements of relational selling provide a means to more profitable, sincere, solid business relationships.	Chambers and Spring (1992)
Relational selling is directed toward achieving mutually satisfying results between buyer and seller, which sustain and enhance future interactions. It is not the buyer and seller working against each other for a win-lose outcome, but the salesperson and buyer communicating to find solutions that benefit both parties.	Ingram, Inks and Mabie (1994)
Relational selling focuses on behaviours designed to create long-term mutually beneficial relationships between the buyer and the salesperson. In addition to many of the behaviours employed in transactional selling, relational selling requires the salesperson to devote greater attention to behaviours designed to develop trust and add value over the long run. These behaviours include trust building, listening, problem identification, and problem solving.	DeVincentis and Rackham (1999)
Relationship selling is to develop strong relations with customers; a relationship propensity should penetrate into organizational thoughts, values and norms.	Day (2000)
Relationship selling implies a strong morality of cooperation in selling enterprise which can be investigated through accepting organizational citizenship behaviour by salespersons.	Homburg, Workman, Jensen (2002)
Relationship selling is method of selling in which the seller establishes close and personal relations to customers and though such trust, they are the winners of the transaction.	Rigg (2004)
Relationship selling that has accepted a long term insight on interactions between buyer and seller in contrary to short term traditional selling.	Cron and De-Carlo (2006)
Relational selling focuses on behaviours designed to create long-term mutually beneficial relationships between the buyer and the salesperson. In addition to many of the behaviours employed in transactional selling, relational selling requires the salesperson to devote greater attention to behaviours designed to develop trust and add value over the long run. These behaviours include trust building, listening, problem identification, and problem solving.	Avila, Inks, Avila (2006)
Relationship selling is at the forefront of marketing practice and research.	Palmatier, Houston, Dant, Grewal (2013)
Relationship selling face now new challenges such as the rapid development of new technologies, growing expectations from buyers, and more administrative activities that hinder opportunities for relationship building.	Dixon, Frewer, Kent (2011)
Relational selling is at a crossroads, such that some trends undermine strong, face-to-face relationships, but other trends demand such interactions.	Paesbrugge, Rangarajan, Sharma, Syam, Jha (2017)

Source: own study based on a systematic literature review

In addition, it should be emphasized that the evolution of theoretical mechanisms is analogous and presents some changes in the approach, i.e. the theoretical focus on the study of sales relations has shifted from individual characteristics (sellers or buyers) to dyadic ones, and then to network dependencies, and a departure from theories suggesting interdependence based on power and resources, to those that identify dependency based on trust and long-term commitment (Arli, Bauer, Palmatier, 2018, p. 170). Moreover, based on the analysis of publications from 1970 (when searching for keywords related to relational sales) in the world literature (see Figure 1), they determined the frequency of certain changes and trends in relational sales, and after a deeper verification of critical theory, research and practice, they determined six key principles of relational selling effectiveness (Arli, Bauer, Palmatier, 2018, p. 170):

- Increasing the strategic role of internal sales departments.
- Obtaining customer information related to e-commerce, privacy and legal environment.
- Integrating the process of building relationships between omnichannel interfaces.
- Understanding the impact of technology applications on relational contexts.
- Using big data for more effective relational selling.
- The use of artificial intelligence for relational sales.

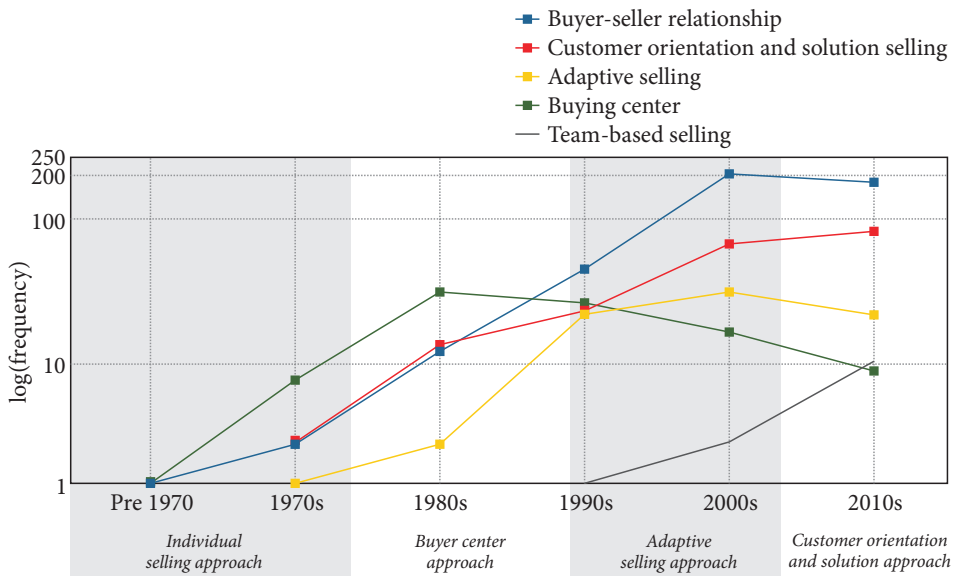


Fig. 1. Analyses of publications from 1970 (when searching for keywords related to relational selling) in world literature

Source: Arli, Bauer, Palmatier, 2018, p. 171

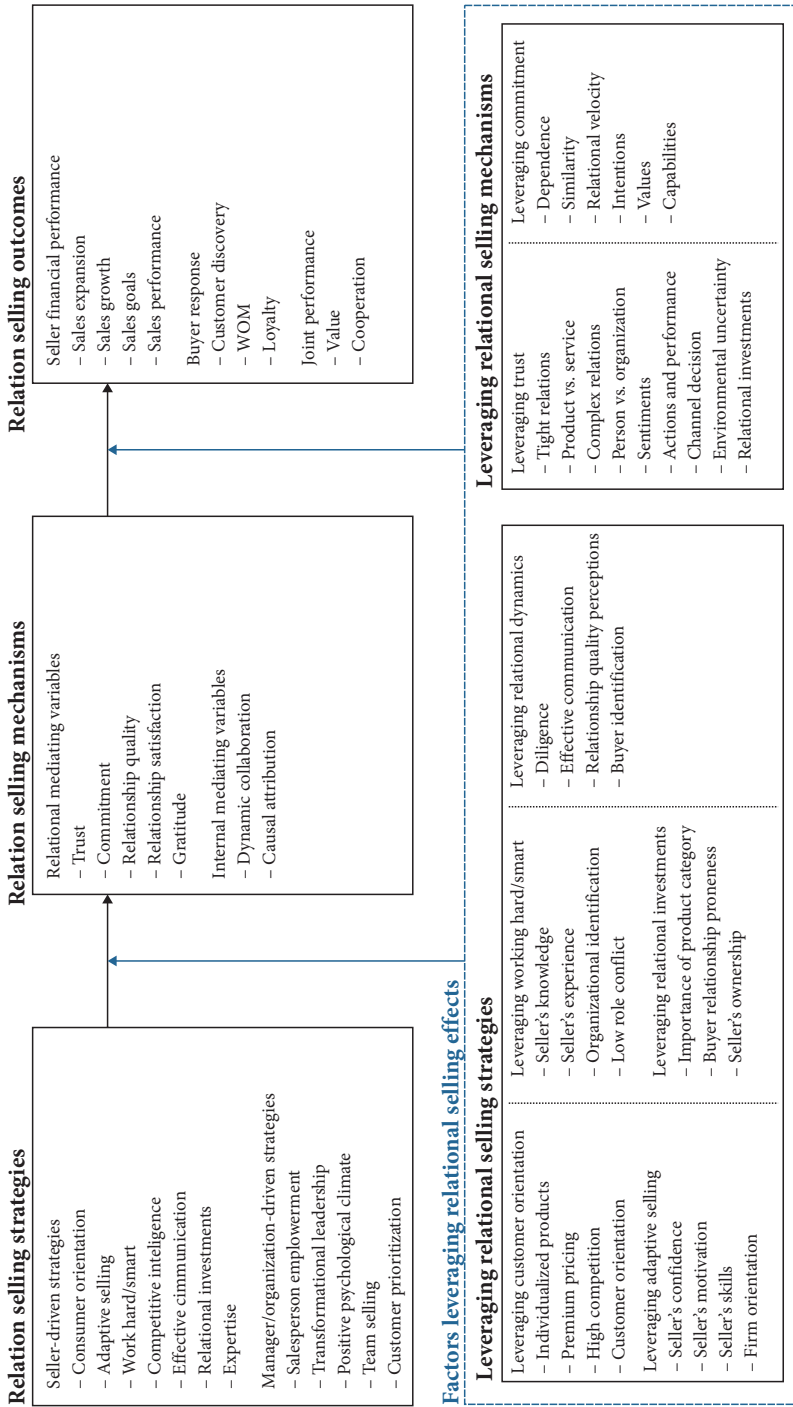


Fig. 2. Framework for a systematic review of the world literature on relational selling

Source: Arli, Bauer, Palmatier, 2018, p. 178



Another important element in identifying the relational selling process is getting to know the theory of this process from the point of view of research and practice. Various adaptive behaviours on the market in the relational sales process can create positive internal relations between employees and sales departments, and are also a necessary condition for creating external relationships with customers (Day, 2000). All the elements listed in the figure indicate the basic trends aimed at ensuring the survival of the organization and building long-term relationships with customers, which are the basis of relationship selling goals.

Summing up the evolution of relational sales, it should be emphasized that it is at a crossroads, because some socio-economic and technological trends weaken the ability of sellers to build strong relationships with the customer, i.e. the growth of e-commerce, but others pay attention to the increase in such relationships as services or prosumption. It should be noted that in the literature on the subject, the authors focus mainly on strategies, mechanisms, results of relational sales, while models of this sales are not presented. This dissertation aims to present the relational sales model and indicators determining its maturity in enterprises, as well as focusing on the indicator of comprehensive customer service, without which no sales would take place. Figure 2 below presents the framework for the literature review on relational selling according to Arli, Bauer, Palmatier (2018, p. 178).

With reference to the figure above, it can be seen that the authors focus on four elements (see Figure 2):

- Relational selling strategies that have the overarching goal of creating, establishing, and maintaining long-term relationships with loyal, profitable customers (Ahearne, Jelinek, Jones, 2007; Bonner, Calantone, 2005; Guenzi, Pardo, Georges, 2007); in addition, sellers use relationship strategies at various levels of intensity, depending on the stage of their relationship with the customer, and strategies within the company, which are to increase the effectiveness of the seller.
- Relational sales mechanisms, in which relational intermediary variables (trust, commitment, relationship quality, relationship satisfaction and gratitude) and internal intermediary variables (dynamic collaboration and causal attribution) can be distinguished.
- Relational sales performance includes primarily seller, buyer, and joint performance results.
- Factors supporting better effects of relational sales are supporting strategies and supporting mechanisms. It should be emphasized that these strategies include: leveraging customer orientation, leveraging adaptive selling, leveraging working hard/smart strategies, leveraging relational investments, leveraging relational dynamics, while leveraging trust and leveraging commitment are added to the leveraging relational selling mechanisms.

When synthesizing all the sources of literature on relational selling, it should be noted that it is evolving in terms of technology and world crises, such as pandemics or wars. What is more, the customer's approach on the market is changing and it is becoming netizen, using various information channels, looking for security and privacy in the virtual world. In business, the changing roles of a salesperson, from a customer advisor to a relationship manager, indicate some opportunities to use the expanded knowledge to increase profits and build trust, engaging customers along the path of their long-term positive experience. However, extended relationships also improve the overall management in the sales process, mitigate the increasing conflicts between customers and entrepreneurs, and taking into account the sense of own effectiveness of sellers or the transactional leadership behaviour of managers, they can help eliminate the negative effects of ongoing activities (Schmitz, Ganesan, 2014). The importance of relational selling in the real world of business means adhering to internal and external selling practices, which can often be a problem. Many researchers and business practitioners recommend enterprises to invite their clients to co-create relationship strategies, prosumption, crowdsourcing and allowing them to define relationships in the creation process. Technology should be used wisely if a company wants to use it to increase efficiency, but not at the cost of losing interaction and collaboration with internal and external customers. Enterprises should select and determine, based on analyzes and research, which applications are most useful for the client.

## **Conclusions and discussions**

In conclusion, it should be noted that VUCA times have disrupted the selling processes of many enterprises around the world. Modern enterprises are focused on increasing their competitiveness and increasing their market share. One of the ways to achieve this goal is to establish lasting relationships with customers, including through proper implementation and application of the principles of relational sale and support of new technological solutions. Both areas are especially important for the value perceived by customers. Enterprises can use various techniques of relational sale, which are able to evoke the customer satisfaction with the purchase and its permanent "bond" with the enterprise. The literature review allow drawing specific conclusions regarding the role and importance of the relationship sales process, especially in relation to the post pandemic period. The conclusions are as follows:

An important element of ensuring sales security during the VUCA period should be building relationships with customers and obtaining constant profits by standardizing purchasing processes and building loyalty.

Each organization should be close to its stakeholders, both internal (employee relations) and external, to identify changing trends and threats on the market.

It is important to develop ways to encourage customers to buy in various situations, including crisis situations, because the relationship can affect the formation of brand advocates.

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