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The relationship sales process in VUCA times – practical aspects (Part 2)

Proces sprzedaży relacyjnej w czasach VUCA – aspekty praktyczne (Część 2)

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Abstract:

Research objectives and hypothesis/research questions

The aim of the article is to present the success factors of the process of relationship sales created on the basis of the research made in innovative enterprises in Poland from the NewConnect market. In the article both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. The data for analysis were obtained using the diagnostic survey method using the questionnaire technique, it means that the CATI method was used to obtain the data, which made it possible to find out the opinions of the respondents via a telephone conversation. The data was obtained in July – August 2022 in the form of a survey (quantitative research) – 100 enterprises, as well as interviews of selected innovative enterprises at the turn of September and October 2022 – 10 managers. The considerations contained in the article are the part of a broader research on the role of relationship sales in functioning innovative enterprises from the NewConnect market. The article presents elements that can be considered as the basis for the success of innovative enterprises on the market. The research part describes the research methodology and the results of the conducted surveys as well as the conclusions resulting from the research.

Research methods

In addition to the empirical method, the study also used theoretical research methods, such as the analytical-synthetic method. Generalization and inference were used to formulate conclusions.

Main results

The analysis of the literature and the results of the research showed that the prospects for the development of the relationship sales process are significantly high, especially this aspect has become quite important during the pandemic and VUCA times and enterprises are increasingly interested in creating the relationship sales process in their daily business activities.

Implications for theory and practice

The research confirmed that there is a significant relationship between increasing the efficiency of the enterprise's operations, financial liquidity, the effectiveness and continuity of the basic processes of the daily functioning of the company, creating long-term business relationships and obtaining important data for the company, and the company's participation in the use of relationship sales. This relationship is illustrated by the fact that without building relationship sales, in the modern world of crises, aimed at achieving goals, innovation, cooperation and communication, it is impossible to build effective and efficient cooperation with the stakeholders of the organization.

Keywords: evolution of relationship selling, innovative enterprise, NewConnect market

Abstrakt:

Cel badań i hipotezy/pytania badawcze

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie czynników sukcesu procesu relacyjnej sprzedaży, opracowanych na podstawie badań przeprowadzonych w innowacyjnych przedsiębiorstwach w Polsce z rynku NewConnect. W opracowaniu zastosowano zarówno ilościowe, jak i jakościowe metody badawcze. Dane do analizy pozyskano metodą sondażu diagnostycznego z wykorzystaniem techniki kwestionariuszowej, tj. do uzyskania danych zastosowano metodę CATI, co umożliwiło poznanie opinii respondentów w drodze rozmowy telefonicznej. Dane pozyskano w okresie lipiec – sierpień 2022 r. w formie ankiety (badania ilościowe) – 100 przedsiębiorstw oraz wywiadów wybranych innowacyjnych przedsiębiorstw na przełomie września i października 2022 r. – 10 menedżerów. Rozważania zawarte w artykule są częścią zakrojonych na szeroką skalę badań nad rolą sprzedaży relacyjnej w funkcjonowaniu innowacyjnych przedsiębiorstw z rynku NewConnect. W części badawczej opisano metodologię badań i wyniki przeprowadzonych badań ankietowych oraz wnioski z nich wynikające.

Metody badawcze

Poza metodą empiryczną w pracy wykorzystano również teoretyczne metody badawcze, takie jak metoda analityczno-syntetyczna. Do sformułowania wniosków wykorzystano uogólnienie i wnioskowanie.

Główne wyniki

Analiza literatury przedmiotu oraz wyniki badań wykazały, że perspektywy rozwoju procesu sprzedaży relacyjnej są znacząco wysokie, szczególnie ten aspekt nabrał dużego znaczenia w czasach pandemii i czasach VUCA, a przedsiębiorstwa są coraz bardziej zainteresowane tworzeniem procesów sprzedaży relacyjnej w ich codziennej działalności biznesowej.

Implikacje dla teorii i praktyki

Badania potwierdziły, że istnieje istotny związek pomiędzy zwiększeniem efektywności działania przedsiębiorstwa, płynnością finansową, skutecznością i ciągłością podstawowych procesów codziennego funkcjonowania firmy, tworzeniem długoterminowych relacji biznesowych i pozyskiwaniem ważnych dla przedsiębiorstw danych a udziałem firmy w wykorzystaniu sprzedaży relacyjnej. Związek ten obrazuje fakt, że bez budowania sprzedaży relacyjnej we współczesnym świecie kryzysów – ukierunkowanej na osiągnięcie celów, innowacyjność, współpracę i komunikację – nie da się budować efektywnej i skutecznej współpracy z interesariuszami organizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: ewolucja sprzedaży relacyjnej, innowacyjne przedsiębiorstwo, rynek NewConnect

Introduction

Relational selling is a customer-oriented sales approach that emphasizes trust, long-term engagement, and personalized interactions over aggressive, transaction-based selling tactics (Dwyer, Schurr, Oh, 1987). Unlike traditional sales models that focus on closing individual deals, relational selling seeks to develop ongoing partnerships that create mutual value for both sellers and customers. This approach is particularly crucial in B2B markets, where long-term relationships and personalized services are often decisive factors for customer retention and business growth (Palmatier, 2008).

The concept of relational selling is rooted in relationship marketing theory, which argues that strong customer relationships lead to increased loyalty, higher customer lifetime value, and competitive advantage (Morgan, Hunt, 1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing posits that relationships are built on two primary factors:

- trust – the confidence that a company will fulfill its promises;
- commitment – a willingness to maintain a long-term business relationship.

Relational selling is rooted in several key theoretical frameworks that explain how businesses build, maintain, and benefit from long-term customer relationships. The transition from transactional to relational sales models has been influenced by relationship marketing theory, social exchange theory, commitment-trust theory, and customer relationship management (CRM) principles.

The evolution from transactional to relational selling reflects broader changes in marketing philosophy, consumer behavior, and technological advancements. In traditional sales models, the primary focus was on closing individual transactions, often emphasizing price, product features, and short-term revenue generation (Kotler, Keller, 2016). However, as markets became more competitive and customers gained greater access to information, companies began shifting toward customer-centric sales approaches that emphasize long-term value (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key differences between transactional and relational selling

Characteristic	Transactional Selling	Relational Selling
Focus	One-time sales	Long-term relationships
Customer Value	Based on price	Based on trust, service, and personalization
Communication	One-way (persuasive)	Two-way (dialogue-based)
Customer Retention	Low	High
Salesperson Role	Product-centered	Consultant/advisor
Key Metrics	Sales volume	Customer lifetime value (CLV), Net Promoter Score (NPS)

Source: own study based on Kotler, Keller, 2016

Relational selling matters because it:

- **increased competition** – in markets with many alternatives, customers prefer brands that build relationships rather than those that simply offer low prices (Reinartz, Kumar, 2003);
- **customer empowerment** – with the rise of the internet and social media, customers now have access to vast amounts of information and expect highly personalized engagement (Trainor, 2012);
- **technological advancements** – AI, big data, and CRM tools have enabled sales teams to manage and personalize relationships at scale (Rust, Huang, 2021).

1. Description of the research sample

Enterprises listed on alternative markets, including the NewConnect market, are mainly characterized by (NewConnect, 2015, pp. 9-15):

- small, medium, and less often large – these are mainly newly established enterprises (e.g. start-ups) or enterprises in the early stages of development, looking for effective ways to build their value on the market; However, there may be enterprises that already have an established position on the market, but do not want to enter the main market for various reasons;
- high growth potential and flexibility/“agility” – as they operate in innovative industries and sectors that reflect market niches, e.g. in the area of advanced technologies, ecology, specialist services, or financial activities;
- the desire to quickly raise capital for development, including for the improvement of the aforementioned technologies – that is, the basic activity, but also auxiliary activities, related to, inter alia, with establishing business (B2B) and customer relations (B2C) as well as with state and local administration entities (B2A); the need to raise capital arises from the high level of capital intensity of the implemented processes (e.g. created innovations), as well as the high unpredictability of markets (competitors’ activities and customers’ purchasing behaviour) and the period of implementation of processes/innovations (the period of work on a specific solution/process is determined by the acquired capital);
- difficulties in obtaining financing for development – mainly because the markets in which these enterprises operate are underdeveloped and the demand for goods/services may not be high enough; there may also be a relatively low level of public confidence (and thus financing in the form of loans and credits offered by banks is difficult) to this type of activity, or the cost of capital offered by banks is too high for these enterprises (see Figure 1).

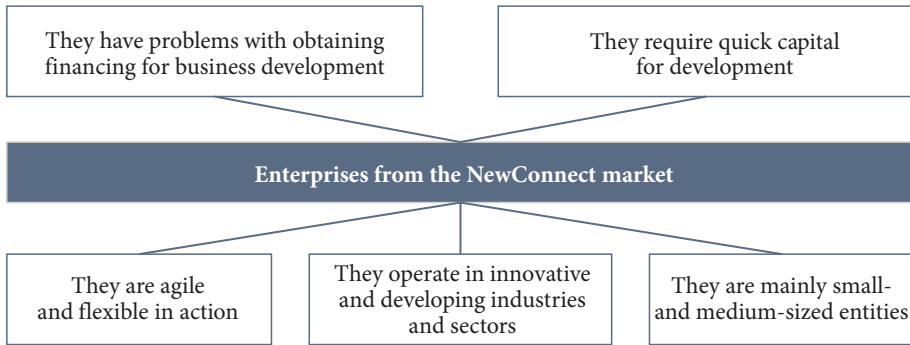


Fig. 1. Basic attributes of enterprises listed on the NewConnect market

Source: own study based on: Woźniak, Pawlak, Zaskórski, 2018

The attributes of companies listed on the NewConnect market may suggest a relatively high level of risk in the activities undertaken (Kicia, 2011, p. 57 et seq.). In addition, the environment also affects the level of risk. One of the basic activities in the field of risk control in enterprises is reducing the negative impact of threats and avoiding threats (McNally, 2015, pp. 27-30; ISO, 2018). However, this is a “traditional” approach. In line with the modern approach to risk management (e.g. in operating activities), risk is controlled in order to create the so-called chance factors (Kasiewicz, Rogowski, 2006, p. 34). The specificity of the operations of enterprises on the NewConnect market requires interaction with external stakeholders, e.g. in terms of acquiring resources, improving the flow of information, or establishing new and lasting relationships – in order to successively reduce the level of uncertainty and risk in the environment.

The empirical research was conducted in two main stages (Flick, 2011, pp. 157-160; Negacz, 2014, pp. 262-265). The first stage is a survey (using the CATI – Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing technique) on a sample of 100 innovative companies listed on the NewConnect market – the survey was conducted in the period July – August 2021. The second stage was to conduct 10 in-depth interviews (IDI – Individual In-Depth Interview) among the respondents previously included in the CATI survey and to prepare case studies on this basis. This study was performed in the period September – October 2021. The CATI and IDI survey covered the entire territory of Poland (16 provinces).

The respondents in both the CATI and IDI surveys were managers responsible for relations with the environment, supply, sales and commercial cooperation, employed in companies listed on the NewConnect market. One respondent from each enterprise was included in the study. The criteria for selecting entities for the sample in the CATI and IDI research are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Selection of subjects for the research sample of enterprises

Components	Description
Entity selection criterion (CATI survey)	Systematic random selection (including taking into account the criterion of the leading business profile of the company indicated for the purposes of records on the NewConnect market) in layers (the layers correspond to the size of the company).
Entity selection criterion (IDI study)	Enterprises selected from the CATI research sample (targeted selection) – the basic criterion for selecting enterprises for in-depth interviews was the number of entities qualified for the CATI survey in terms of the criterion of the leading profile of activity (in other words – respondents were selected from those classes of activity in which the CATI survey included the most entities). In the IDI survey, selected groups of enterprises are: trade, IT, production, financial services, training activities, construction.
Stakeholder groups in the study (CATI and IDI research)	Four groups: internal stakeholders, institutional customers, individual customers, as well as other entities, e.g. external process contractors, shareholders, co-operators, etc.
Sample size (CATI survey)	N = 100 enterprises (27% of entities from the population – as at the survey date, the population consisted of 373 companies, whose headquarters are in Poland, and also operate in Poland) (at the end of 2021).
Sample size (IDI survey)	N = 10 enterprises (selected from among the entities included in the CASI study).

Source: own study

When selecting entities for the CATI survey, the full classification of activities on the NewConnect market, i.e. the list of 80 sectors, was not used. All classes of activity are grouped into coherent subject groups in order to facilitate subsequent analysis and inference: construction, commerce, e-commerce, eco-energy, IT, telecommunications, investments, financial services, training activities, media, real estate, health care, recycling, new technologies, leisure, as well as production/ industrial processing.

Research limitations should also be mentioned here. Well, when analyzing the obtained results (both in the case of CATI and IDI studies), one should take into account the fact that the study was conducted on a relatively small sample – so this study can be treated as a kind of “fragment” and only a substantive and methodological basis for further research. Therefore, it is difficult to apply inference to the entire population – the resulting conclusions can be treated as observations relating to the surveyed companies, as well as the basis for the construction of the relational sales model and determining the level of their process maturity in this sales in companies listed on the NewConnect market in Poland in terms of communication with customers and the role as well as the importance of social media, digital marketing and customer service in improving and increasing the competitive advantage of innovative enterprises (Sagan, 2016, pp. 20-25). It is worth remembering that the NewConnect market is diversified – objectively, subjectively and spatially, i.e. in terms of the number

of industries, age of enterprises or the scale of their operations. Moreover, it is a dynamic and rapidly changing market - both in terms of innovation and flexibility of enterprises, as well as the structure of the market itself and the number of listed companies from year to year. Moreover, only the opinions of the respondents were examined, which could have distorted the actual picture of the situation (the respondents might have shown a tendency to overstate the answers in favour of a good image of the company – especially since the interviewer was present when answering). The study also focused only on selected aspects of business operations, mainly due to the purpose of the study.

Table 3. Criteria for description of the research sample (N = 100)

Size of an enterprise					
Micro	Small		Medium	Big	
0	40		31	29	
Scale of enterprise's operation					
Local	Regional	Domestic	European	International	
6	1	24	38	31	
Revenue for the year 2020 (net)					
0-10 mln PLN	10-20 mln PLN	20-30 mln PLN	30-50 mln PLN	50-100 mln PLN	More than 100 mln PLN
37	17	9	8	11	18
Respondent's position in enterprise					
The highest level of management	The intermediate level of management		The lowest level of management		
52	23		25		
Age of enterprise					
Very young (1-3 years)	Young (4-6years)	Young enough (7-15 years)	Experienced (16-24 years)	Mature (25 < years)	
1	0	8	48	43	

Source: own work

In the study, systematic random selection was used (taking into account the criterion of the leading profile of activity indicated for the purposes of records on the NewConnect market) in layers (the layers correspond to the size of the enterprise). The respondents were managers or managers (of the highest or middle level) responsible for the area of relations with the environment or innovation, or operational employees (of the lowest level) employed in companies listed on the NewConnect market (1 respondent from each company). The research sample is described in detail in Table 3.

2. The process of relationship sales in enterprises – own research

Due to the own research for many enterprise, the impact of relational sales is very noticeable in many areas of operation, i.e. establishing lasting business relationships, increasing professional customer service, promoting business through the website, social media, newsletters, etc., increasing efficiency in ongoing communication inside and outside the company, planning, forecasting and scheduling sales processes, creating and sharing key knowledge with employees and other stakeholders, storing and processing key data for the company, acquiring key data for the company, building IT technical infrastructure (server rooms, computer equipment, as well as increasing the role of Big Data or Artificial Intelligence, etc.), support for administrative processes or improvement of reporting, analysis and evaluation of activities (processes) and others, such as: negotiations with the contractor in order to agree terms sales, mutual contacts with recipients, customers, etc., and joint consultations.

The relational sales model, apart from the architecture of relationship systems and the organization of the sales management process, is also (and even above all) the participation and involvement of all employees of the company in building the maturity of the sales. This requires not so much training (these are rather aimed at management), but clear messages on:

- company mission, vision and goals;
- the impact of relational sales factors on the achievement of goals;
- the existence of a system of relations in the enterprise;
- stages of the sales management process;
- the importance of information and knowledge of employees for the success of the entire relational sales process and the success of the organization;
- minimizing sales risk;
- building the trust and credibility of all stakeholders of the organization;
- the role of each employee in the sales management process, mainly the role in identifying and reporting threats from the market;
- how to engage the client in the co-design and co-implementation of products (the so-called prosumption).

Only clear, simple, legible messages and the presentation of relational sales goals will cause employees to identify with the company and to engage themselves in the process of building customer trust, noticing its positive effects.

Organizations with a high level of relational sales, in addition to information transparency and lasting relationships with customers, are characterized by the following features:

1. The principles of sales ethics are established and followed.
2. Members of the organization accept the continuity of the sales process and take responsibility for any sales errors.

3. Information is not hidden for fear that the company will be poorly received on the market, on the contrary, it is disclosed so that problems are quickly solved.
4. There is acceptance for *whistleblowing* in dealing with stakeholders.
5. Proper sales reporting behaviours are noticed and rewarded.
6. There is an appreciation of knowledge and skills in the field of relational selling, supporting and developing skills, enabling training.
7. Credible evidence is provided that *the status quo* is consistently and vigorously challenged, with preference for development, openness to challenges, innovation, and the individual judicious response to new sales challenges.

The above rules apply to all enterprises, small, medium or large. Practice shows, however, that sometimes relationship sales in organizations focus on meeting specific requirements set by top management and developing appropriate documents for this purpose, rather than creating the basis for the effectiveness of this process. This leads to situations in which managers themselves may perceive the sense of their role and sales procedures as primarily ensuring compliance with regulations and specific standards, without going beyond the level imposed by the organization.

In reference to the research conducted among selected companies in Poland on the NewConnect market, it can be noticed that managers from small, medium and large companies assigned quite a lot of weight to five elements in the relational sale process in the commercial process in the enterprise, while two elements were described as less important (i.e. confirming the sales process and closing sales while implementing a cooperation strategy and engaging the client in co-designing and co-implementing the product/service, the so-called presumption) – on a scale from 0 to 5, where the value 0 means no meaning, and the value 5 has a distinctive meaning (see Figure 2):

- building trust and credibility in the eyes of the customer while minimizing risk in the purchasing process (average of all ratings 4.74);
- proper identification of the client's needs and building his commitment (average of all ratings 4.65);
- perfect product presentation and surroundings of the place of sale (average of all ratings 4.50);
- confirmation of the sales process and closing of sales with the simultaneous implementation of the cooperation strategy (average of all ratings 4.10);
- seller's involvement and professional customer service in the sales process (average of all ratings 4.53);
- engaging the client in the co-design and co-implementation of the product/service (the so-called presumption) (average of all ratings 3.88);
- contact intensity and long-term customer orientation (average of all ratings 4.23);
- quick problem solving or customer complaints and focus on creating value for the customer (average of all ratings 4.68).

As can be seen in the chart above, out of the eight elements considered important by managers, as many as five listed above were considered permanent and received a high weight, i.e. above 4.5, and are considered to be the most important elements in the process of creating relationship sales and effective contact with the customer.

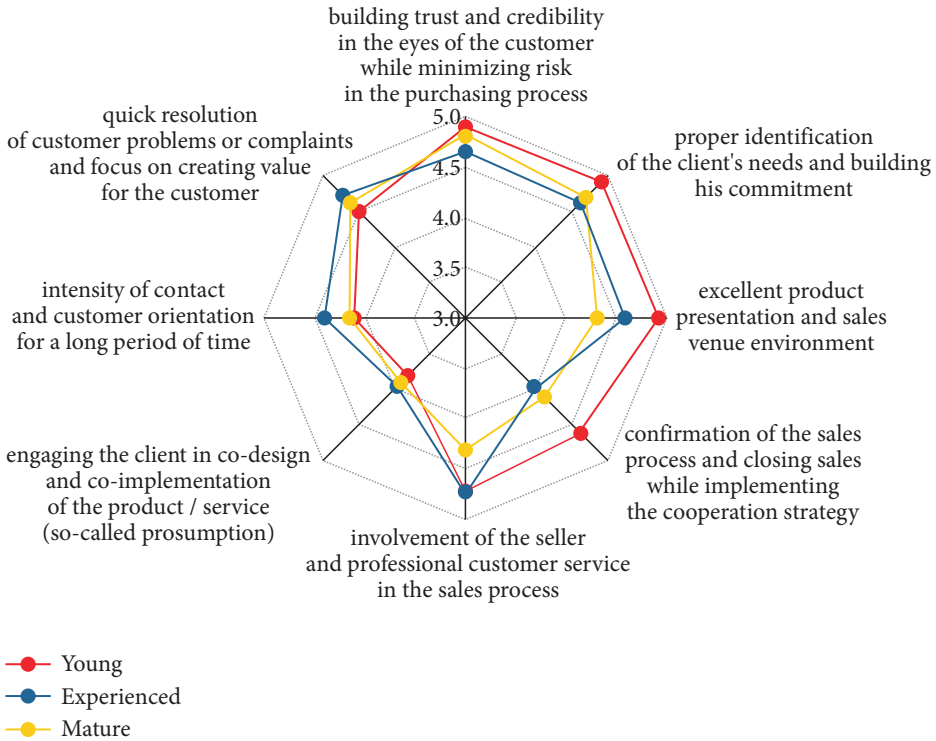


Fig. 2. The most important elements of relationship sales in the commercial process in a company according to the surveyed managers from the NewConnect market in Poland ($N = 100$) in (%) (July-August, 2022)

Source: own study

Analyzing the answers of the respondents further and referring to the IDI survey, it can be noticed that the respondents (see Table 4):

- as a rule, they notice the need for systematic development of relational selling methods and indicate that it is mainly determined by changes taking place on the market and the requirements of customers and partners; According to the respondents, modern enterprises, wishing to be competitive, should take care of the sales and technological “back-up”, as this guarantees both increased flexibility in operation and better understanding of the needs of stakeholders (through data analysis and creating knowledge);

- link the development of relationship sales with “breakthrough” moments in the development of the company and key activities from the point of view of creating its value; thus, the development of relational sales methods is not “continuous”, but only “jump” and it should be emphasized that this approach does not have to be treated as wrong – in many companies that do not have to keep up with all the novelties on the market, this approach is sufficient; However, it is worth remembering that introducing modernizations/changes in everyday functioning only in “breakthrough” situations for the company may turn out to be insufficient, because it is an *ex post action*, i.e. adaptation to the changes in the environment – in this case, the development of a new the relational sales model may turn out to be costly and in a sense “late” in relation to the dynamics of the environment;
- are willing to use benchmarking of other companies, wanting to acquire new technologies and solutions – the support of external entities is important for respondents because it can increase the scope of acquired functions and improve their quality, while reducing operating costs.

Table 4. Taking into account the systematic development of relational selling methods by enterprises – IDI study (N = 10)

No.*	Sector	Taking into account the systematic development of relational sales methods by enterprises
P1.	Financial services	“We believe that the systematic development of relationship selling methods is important in our business. This is mainly due to the change in the specifics of the services we provide – these are also, in a sense, changes conditioned by the dynamics of the environment (regulations, competitors’ offers, etc.)”.
P2.	Production	“At the current stage of the company’s development, it is not important to us – we do not care about systematic improvement of the applied methods of relationship sales. We use simple, traditional e-mail and telephone communication in contact with the client and traditional sales methods. I have it completely enough to operate effectively and efficiently on the market”.
P3.	Trade	“We do not see the need to systematically develop relationship selling methods because we use benchmarking solutions. In the company, we use external information from suppliers and customers – it is definitely cost-optimized and more convenient to have traditional sales, because you don’t have to worry about it, you don’t need to have any relational sales specialists”.
P4.	Training activities	“The development of relational selling methods is important to us, but not crucial. Basically, we refresh/update/modernize the methods used once in a while to adjust to the market. This is due to the fact that we are constantly developing – that’s why we sometimes need some additional, new sales solutions. In other words – just as the company moves forward, so does our development. We also use solutions from other companies and IT outsourcing – mainly in the field of website maintenance”.

cont. tab. 4

No.*	Sector	Taking into account the systematic development of relational sales methods by enterprises
P5.	Production	“The development of relationship sales methods is important to us. It’s mainly about fighting the excess of irrelevant information that comes to us from the environment. We mainly improve specialists responsible for the acquisition, storage and analysis of data and information, or creating databases. It is also important for us to provide our clients with valuable and reliable information – so we also develop people and technologies responsible for communicating with clients”.
P6.	Information technology	“Our company is growing every day. We operate on an ongoing basis. Today, everyone has to develop, and the market is more and more demanding and technologies are moving forward very quickly, so we also have to keep up with the trends. Thanks to this, we can be competitive, because we use various methods of relationship sales. We also use ideas from other companies”.
P7.	Construction	“We are not currently focused on developing relationship selling methods. Maybe there would be a need if we took over some other company and simply expanded our activities, e.g. to another country. Maybe then you would have to think about it, but as we operate here, in the south of Poland, in several provinces, there is no such need. We are satisfied with the current office and traditional sales methods. The bigger problem for us is acquiring competent employees for sale”.
P8.	Construction	“In the area of sales, we are not limited to novelties. If there are modern solutions that can help us, we are willing to implement them, especially in customer retention. However, we do not stimulate the relational selling methods on our own – changes in our company are more determined by changes in the market. We do not use solutions from other companies – we have one qualified employee who deals with the area of maintaining relationships with clients, because we decided that it would be easy for us than to entrust service to many people”.
P9.	Information technology	“Of course we care about the development of relationship sales. The IT systems we use change frequently and are supposed to help us do that. Otherwise, we would not be a competitive and modern company at all – and we want us to be perceived in this way. We also do not use solutions from consulting companies. We prefer to employ our own specialists who thoroughly understand the specifics of our company and are able to solve specific problems with customers on an ongoing basis”.
P10.	Financial services	“Yes, we pay attention to the development of relationship selling methods. We do it regularly, because the market is changing and computer equipment wears out after several years of operation – while reliability in operation and customer service is the most important for us. In addition, we hire outsiders for a simple reason – in our opinion, everyone should do what they know best. When it comes to using these methods and supporting them with ICT, it is important to us, and we are not specialists in this field, we also use an external company all the time”.

* The names of the companies under which the surveyed companies operate (P) cannot be disclosed.

Source: own study

Conclusions

The construction of the relational sales process in the VUCA era should mainly be based on: building trust and credibility in the eyes of the customer while minimizing the risk in the purchasing process (average score 4.74); proper recognition of the client's needs and building his commitment (average rating 4.65); perfect presentation of the product and the environment of the point of sale, whether stationary or electronic (average score 4.50); seller's commitment and professional customer service in the online or stationary sales process (average score 4.53); quickly solving problems or customer complaints and focusing on creating value for the customer (average rating 4.68), which will translate into the effectiveness of actions and the organization's resistance to crisis.

Summing up, the study confirmed that there is a significant relationship between improving operational efficiency, financial liquidity, effectiveness and continuity of basic processes of daily operations of the company, building long-term business relationships and obtaining important data for the company and the company's use of relationship sales. This connection is linked to the fact that in the modern world of crisis, it is impossible to establish effective and efficient cooperation with the stakeholders of the organization without establishing relationship sales aimed at achieving goals, innovation, cooperation and communication.

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