

## Online Dating and Social Media for Developing Virtual Buyer-Seller Relationships: A Theoretical Examination of the Literature

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*The more people connect with people, the more they trust them. Technology has helped to provide additional ways for people to connect with each other. Despite the usefulness of technology and the analogy between buyer-seller relationships and interpersonal relationships between men and women, specifically leading to marriage, no one has examined the potential of using online dating tools to help create trust online for salespeople. The purpose of this theoretical paper is to examine the marketing, information technology sales, communications, sociology and psychology literature to suggest how salespeople can use technology to establish virtual or nearly virtual relationships with customers. We suggest that online dating and social media tools have the potential to serve as a good model for virtual buyer-seller relationship. This study provides significant impact upon previous literature by adding and suggesting a technology extension of the buyer seller relationship building process.*

**JEL Codes:** F34, G21 and G24

### 1. Introduction

In today's environment due to technological advances and budget cuts salespeople are relying more and more on online exchanges with customers ranging from email exchanges to use of social media. Marshall et al. (2012) found that in some instances salespeople are having completely virtual relationships with customers. Frequently, this is at the instance of the customer. According to Ken Krogue, co-founder of InsideSales.com a company that provides technology for companies such as AT&T, Cisco Systems and Dell, with virtual meeting software such as GoToMeeting.com and WebEx, communications tools such as Skype and social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, it is becoming easier to sell with few if any face-to-face meetings (Green 2013). Marshall et al. (2012) contend that the face-to-face relationship of salespeople and customers is likely to diminish in predominance. They believe that it will be necessary to rethink what constitutes a good relationship in the view of social media and other technologies. Therefore, how do salespeople develop relationships and maintain trust in this virtual world?

Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) drawing on the work of Thibaut and Kelly (1959) and Scanzoni (1979) proposed a framework for how buyer-seller relationships developed. Their framework includes five stages of development, (1) awareness, (2) exploration, (3) expansion, (4) commitment and (5) dissolution.

Dwyer et al. (1987) developed their model based on the premise of face-to-face interaction between salespeople and their customers. As stated earlier salespeople today are using a variety of technologies to connect with customers. Giamanco and Gregoire (2012) document a completely virtual sale by a sales representative from PGI who completed the entire sales

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process virtually starting with Twitter. This virtual sale is not unusual, one of the authors' previous students, a Polar Tech representative, reported completing the entire sales process virtually, using email. Schultz, Shwepker and Good (2012) found that 88.9% of respondents in their study indicated that they use social media to connect with customers and 91.8% indicated that they use social media to maintain relationships with established customers. Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan (2012) found that there is a positive relationship with the use of social media and the selling organization's ability to create opportunities and manage relationships. This study also found a positive relationship with social media usage and relationship sales performance (Peterson & Krishnan 2012). Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp (2012) propose that these technologies have the potential to affect all aspects of personal selling and sales management. Schultz et al. (2012) state that "If social media is able for example, to enhance client relationships, selling organizations would be wise to incorporate this tool as part of their overall efforts, and not allow its usage to be piecemeal among salespeople" (p. 84). They further state that selling organizations may want to consider including social media as part of their training programs. Social media do not represent the only internet technologies being used, according to a recent survey by Barnes and Lescault (2012) as reported by Schultz et al. (2012) executives from incorporated (Inc.) 500 companies report using message/bulletin boards, blogging, mobile apps, online video, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, texting, Facebook, Podcasting and Foursquare.

The motivation for this study is to propose how online dating and social media tools have the potential to serve as a good model for virtual buyer-seller relationships. Currently no one has proposed how social media and other internet technologies can be incorporated into the buyer-seller relationship model. This study provides significant impact upon previous literature by adding and suggesting a technology extension of the buyer seller relationship building process.

Our goal is to use Dwyer et al.'s (1987) relationship framework and draw on the literature in information technology (IT), sales, communications, sociology and psychology to suggest how salespeople can use technology to establish virtual or nearly virtual relationships with customers. Dwyer et al. (1987) made the analogy between buyer-seller relationships and interpersonal relationships between men and women, specifically leading to marriage providing the relationship framework. Therefore, we will also look at the online dating literature. Interesting, online dating has the potential to serve as a good model for virtual buyer-seller relationship. Droge and Voirol (2011) observed that:

By the way they present the profiles of potential partners in exactly the same manner as items on eBay, Amazon or other shopping sites, with their complex search forms that allow to define the own preferences in mate selection with a precision unknown before, with the tools they offer to evaluate one's own market value and to enhance this value if possible - with all these elements borrowed from modern forms of consumerism and the economic sphere, they suggest a subject position which is very close to what we have outlined above as the main characteristics of a calculating subject in the realm of the market. It is the position of an economic agent who compares offers on a level of equivalence and tries to maximize his own interests (p. 346).

For practitioners, this will serve as a content foundation for training programs for salespeople to use social media and other internet technologies to build relationships with customers. This will also serve as a framework for future research to determine the effectiveness of the technological techniques within each stage of the relationship building process.

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The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: a brief literature review on developing relationships in a virtual setting, using the stages in Dwyer et al's (1987) model; proposing how sales people can use the model in a virtual setting to establish relationships with buyers; and summary, conclusions and limitations.

### 2. Literature Review

Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) drawing on the work of Thibaut and Kelly (1959) and Scanzoni (1979) were the first to propose a theoretical framework for how buyer-seller relationships developed. We will briefly define and discuss each step here, then review how technology is being used in human relationships.

In the *awareness* stage both parties recognize that the other party is a possible exchange partner. In brief, exchange here refers to an exchange of benefits. At this point neither party has had an actual interaction with the other party although either or both may be engaged in activities to improve their attractiveness to the other (Dwyer et al. 1987).

The *exploration stage* is characterized by a search and trial exchange. Both parties are considering the costs and benefits of a possible relationship. A trial purchase may be made. The possible relationship is being evaluated by the parties. The exploration phase has five sub processes: (1) attraction, (2) communication and bargaining, (3) development and exercise of power, (4) norm development, and (5) expectation development (Dwyer, et al. 1987; Scanzoni 1979).

While the concept of attraction has been the subject of some research those studies deviate in how they explain the concept of attraction in a business relationship context (Mortensen, 2012, Schiele & Krummacker 2011). Most of what is known about attraction comes from the social psychology literature (Mortensen, 2012).

Attraction results when the parties in their interaction achieve a "reward-cost outcome in excess of some minimal level" (Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 16). Wilkinson et al (2005) view attraction as the initial spark of a relationship and consider it key to establishing a relationship. In the communication and bargaining phase the parties seek to know each other very well, this includes the exchange of information about themselves, their needs and or resources. If the relationship is to develop and survive this exchange must be mutual (Dwyer et al. 1987). In the power and justice phase, power is viewed as the "ability to achieve intended effects or goals" (Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 17). One party's power over the other is determined by the dependence of one of the party's on the other for valued resources. One party has more power than the other if there are limited or no viable alternatives for the resources. If when party attempts to dominate or coerce the other without providing sufficient rewards the other party may choose to end the association. With norm development the parties are establishing the ground rules for future exchanges. Hald et al (2009) view attraction as a force resulting in a voluntary drawing together of the buyer and seller. Hald et al (2009) see attraction as consisting of expected value, trust and dependency.

It is in the expectations development stage that trust becomes an important concept. Here the parties are establishing their concern for conflicts of interest, unity and trouble. Trust becomes an important concept in understanding these expectations. Dwyer et al. (1987) citing Rotter (1967), define trust as "the belief that a party's word or promise is reliable and a party will fulfil his/her obligations in an exchange relationship," (p. 18). According to

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Golembiewski and McConkie (1975) “there is no other single variable which so thoroughly influences interpersonal and intergroup behavior” (p. 131).

In the *expansion* stage each of the parties achieves increasing benefits due to their increasing interdependence. All of the sub processes from the exploration stage operate here and with the establishment of basic trust in the exploration stage, both parties here engage in increased risk-taking, resulting in an increase in mutual dependence (Dwyer et al. 1987).

The most advanced stage of the buyer-seller relationship is *commitment*. In this stage both parties implicitly or explicitly pledge to continue the relationship. This may include precluding other exchange parties who could provide the same benefits. The benefits of commitment include certainty, efficiency and effectiveness that results from trust (Dwyer et al. 1987).

Finally in the *dissolution* stage the parties withdraw from the relationship. Dissolution can occur at any point in the relationship framework, but if it occurs after commitment it can have great consequences to the parties ranging from litigation to personal disruptions.

While the concept of establishing and developing business relationships has been the subject of business research for some time, surprisingly little is known about the motivations behind these relationships and how those business relationships are initiated and developed between buyer and seller (Halinen 1997; Harris, O'Malley, & Patterson, 2003; Morgan 2000; Wilkeinson et al 2005; Mortsen 2012). Dwyer, et al (1987) first proposed the relationship building process in their seminal theoretical work. This model is presented in many textbooks on personal selling and remains the established framework for developing relationship (Castleberry & Tanner 2014; Manning, et al 2009). However, since then no research has been conducted to empirically test the model in its entirety. There has been some research done on individual steps of the model but not the entire model, in particular attraction within the step of exploration has been examined (Harris, et al 2000; Ellegaard, et al 2003; Ellegaard & Ritter, 2007; Held et al 2009). Yet even here there is a scarcity of literature, (Mortensen, 2012). In the meantime, technology has been advancing and Dweyer et al's (1987) original face-to-face model has not been updated to consider the impact of technology. The purpose of this study is to critically examine the literature and propose how online dating and social media tools have the potential to serve as a good model for virtual buyer-seller relationships within the relationship building framework of Dweyer, et al (1987) and suggest how salespeople can utilize those tools.

### 2.1 Awareness

In the awareness stage interaction between the parties has not transpired, however, either or both of the parties may engage in various activities in order to enhance each one's attractiveness. At this point these actions are unilateral, if the actions become bilateral it marks the beginning of the next stage (Dwyer et al. 1987). The obvious internet tool used to create awareness is the company's website which includes the product offering and when well designed a strong visual appeal.

SinoCast (2007) believes that gaining consumer trust is essential in making the sale. Several research studies have been done on creating online consumer trust (Kim & Ahn, 2006; Koufaris & Hampton-Sosa, 2004; Silverman, Bauchann, & Akharas, 2001). There are three dimensions of building trust online: dispositional, institutional, and Interpersonal.

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Dispositional online trust deals with your personality and your ability to trust people. If you are someone who is generally trusting of other people then you are likely to trust people online (Gefen, 2000; Kim, Kim & Hwang 2009). On the other hand online institutional trust deals with consumer's perception of security and privacy (Papadopoulou, Kanellis & Martakos 2003). Consumers want their information kept confidential and secure. Typically consumers will look for third party seals (BBBOnline, TRUSTe, CPAWebTrust Symbols and Verisign symbols) to trust the website.

Finally, online interpersonal trust involves creating a relationship with the consumer. Typically, companies with social media websites such as, but not limited to, Linked-In and Facebook, let buyers share their personal preferences and experiences via following and reviewing a company's postings, writing reviews, "liking" products, rating products, and chatting amongst other members. This type of interpersonal web-based persuasive behaviour is the highly influential starting point for many shoppers (Kim & Srivastava, 2007).

### 2.2 Exploration

In the exploration stage the potential partners consider the requirements, benefits and liabilities of the potential relationship. As stated earlier, this stage has five sub processes, (1) attraction, (2) communication and bargaining, (3) development and exercise of power, (4) norm development, and (5) expectation development. Interestingly it is at this stage that Dwyer et al. (1987) make the analogy between buyer-seller relationships and interpersonal relationships between men and women, specifically leading to marriage providing the relationship framework. They quote McCall, 1966:

Marriage [is a] restrictive trade agreement. The two individuals agree to exchange only with one another, at least until such time as the balance of trade becomes unfavorable in terms of broader market considerations (Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 14).

Here we will come full circle and look at among other technologies, the way in which couples develop relationships through online dating. It is appropriate to consider online dating and the development of relationships because in this environment according to Sidelinger, Ayash, Godorhazy and Tibbles (2008) "with [these] new communication technologies people have new strategies to develop and maintain relationships. These new strategies can potentially be applied to the buyer-seller relationship.

(1) Attraction – is the initiating process of this stage, it is where the parties achieve through their interaction a reward-cost outcome greater than some minimal level (Dwyer et al. 1987). Rewards/costs are the result of the relationship, for example money or status. Hitsch, Hourtacsu and Aritely (2010) found that users of online dating sites demonstrated strong sorting patterns, looking for specific preferences. They employ various strategies designed to circumvent the constraints of the online environment while attempting to maximize its advantages. Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) found that many of these strategies revolve around the profile. The profile in online dating is short biographical presentation of each participant. It includes photos, demographic characteristics, and descriptions of the participant's likes/dislikes and what he or she is looking for in a partner. In a marketing sense it is the product. Online dating participants attended to subtle, small cues when reading other's presentational messages and often took care in crafting their own. For example online dating participants will often look for a well-written profile equating poor writing with lack of education or inattention to detail. For these online dating participants spelling errors translated into unattractive. Time of emails is also analysed to determine

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compatibility with life patterns. For example if a prospective partner sends an email at 1:00 in the morning, a morning person would interpret this as incompatible. In addition they found that many online dating participants carefully considered how others might interpret their profiles and paid close attention to what each small action or comment may signal (Ellison et al. 2006).

(2) Communication and bargaining - According to Dwyer et al. (1987) “[A] relationship seems unlikely to form without bilateral communication of wants, issues, inputs, and priorities” (p.16). This often is operationalized as disclosure of specific information by each party about themselves. According to Berger and Kellner, (1964) intense conversations that include self-disclosure including opinions, tastes and idiosyncrasies, and a sharing of their everyday world view is crucial in developing a relationship. Droge and Voirol (2011) found that in the online dating world “communication in general is often prone to rapid and extensive self-disclosure,” (348). The result of this intense communication by the participants is the feeling that “their lives are interconnected” even though they have never met face-to-face, (Droge and Voirol 2011, p. 348).

(3) Power and justice - This refers to the dependence one party has on the other. If one party is more dependent on the other, the other party has more power. The coercive use of power is not predicted to facilitate the development of a harmonious relationship (Dwyer et al., 1987).

(4) Norm development - Norms are “expected patterns of behavior,” (Scanzoni 1979, p. 68). It is through the establishment of norms that the partners begin to set the rules for future interactions. Specifically here, the adoption of common goals is important to the establishment of a relationship. Droge and Voirol (2011) citing Droge (2011) state that online daters adjust the dating site’s filters to adjust their selection of a potential partner as precisely as possible in order to assure common social, financial, and education background, similar hobbies and lifestyle, shared interests and opinions. Clearly these individuals are attempting to select those individuals who are most likely to have goals similar to their own.

(5) Expectations development - This process is concerned with the possibilities of unity or conflicts and trouble (Dwyer et al. 1987). Perhaps the most important concept in this process is trust. Trust has emerged as one of the key elements in business relationships and the research has shown that it is crucial in the development and maintenance of relationships (Ganesan 1994; Kumar 1996; Morgan & Hunt 1994). Trust has been a topic of research since the 1950s. There have been a multitude of definitions of trust. Nearly all of the sociologically research defines trust in terms of social relationships (Barber 1983; Good 1988). Both sociologists and philosophers agree that trust is necessary for society to function (Barber 1983). A philosophy definition of trust is “accepted vulnerability to another’s possible but not expected good will toward oneself,” (Baier 1986, p. 235). A psychological definition of trust is provided by Kratcher, Corritore and Wiedenbeck (2005) citing Rotter (1971) as “an expectancy held by individuals or groups that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another can be relied on,” (p.134). In the communication process interpersonal trust is defined “as reliance upon the communication of another in order to achieve a desired but uncertain objective in a risky situation,” (Griffin 1967). One management definition of trust is “the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party based on the expectation that the other will perform action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party,” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman 1995, p. 72). Kratcher, Corritore and Wiedenbeck (2005) citing the Cheskin/Sapient (1999) report state that in E-commerce the “six building

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blocks of trustworthiness, [are] namely seals of approval, branding, fulfilment, navigation, presentation, and technology,” (p. 137). In marketing/sales a buyer’s trust in a vendor appears to be increased by a reputation for reliable, consistent and fair behavior (Ganesan 1994).

The online environment relies on communication and therefore, trust in the communication process is pertinent. In addition to the basic communication process definition of trust there appear to also be degrees of interpersonal trust (Griffin 1967). Of particular interest here is the trust of a speaker by a listener called source credibility (Howland, Janis & Kelly 1953). Source credibility is defined as the “resultant value of (1) the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions (his expertness) and (2) the degree of confidence in the communicator’s intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid (his trustworthiness),” (p. 21). Griffin’s (1967) review of the literature concluded that five characteristics perceived by a listener appear to be the dimensions of a speaker’s source credibility: “expertness, reliability, intentions, dynamism and personal attractiveness,” (p. 118).

Expertness is seen as degree of ability or skill relevant to the topic. Reliability is seen as the degree to which the communicator is dependable, predictable or consistent, Intentions refers to the speakers intents toward the listener and whether the listener perceives them to be favourable or unfavourable. Dynamism is the listener’s perception that the speaker’s communication is more active than passive. Personal attractiveness of the speaker is difficult to measure and may be operating without the conscious perception of the listener (Griffin 1967).

In online dating participants are not known to each other and therefore, there is missing information related to source credibility. Gracyalny (2007) states that in order to build trust online this missing information “would need to be replaced with ones that the reader would find competent, predictable and benevolent as well as personally attractive and appealing to a majority of the listener’s peers,” (p. 13). In order to achieve this objective successful online dating sites structure the users’ profile tools to assist members in building an identity that addresses this missing information. In addition online daters approach to trust can best be described as “trust but verify.” Participants of online dating seem to be willing to accept some level of misrepresentation as unintentional. Ellison et al. (2006) refer to this phenomenon as the “foggy mirror.” They described this as the “user acknowledge[ing] that sometimes others weren’t lying per se, but the fact that their self-image differed from other’s perceptions meant that their textual self-descriptions would diverge from a third-party’s description,” (p. 428). In an attempt to demonstrate their trustworthiness, many online daters will “show” rather than tell. For example, they will use pictures of themselves showing them with important aspects of their lives or engaged in activities that support the claim of “active.” Another tool to show is to use stories in the profile that demonstrate character. These participants are aware that online dating is associated with deceptive communication practices and as a result work to present themselves as credible (Ellison, et al. 2006).

Because online dating participants recognize that despite their own efforts to demonstrate trustworthiness others may be intentionally misrepresenting themselves. In order to address these concerns online daters will often run background checks on potential partners (Baertlein 2004). Sometimes online daters will simply Google a potential partner (Chih-Hui et al. 2009).

Online auctions also present another virtual environment where trust is an issue. This was one of the principal challenges eBay faced at its beginning. eBay’s main response to this

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challenge was to create the ability for both buyers and sellers of completed auctions to leave publically observable feedback and provide ratings of users based on the feedback. According to Brown and Morgan (2006), “the reputation system enables a form of trust to be built – good sellers are rewarded for providing high-quality service and bad sellers are punished by the loss of future sales or lower prices or both,” (p. 63). At the same time they also note that eBay’s system does have some flaws, for example there is no differentiation in feedback for low versus high value items. They suggest transaction-weighted reputational statistics to counter this flaw.

### 2.3 Expansion

This stage is the continuation of the previous stage with the exchange partners seeking to increase their respective benefits (Dwyer et al. 1987). The previous five sub processes still operate in this stage with the distinction that the basics of trust that were previously established, lead to increased risk taking by the associates. According to Scanzoni (1979), the associates have moved past testing each other and the association is now “characterized by continual enlargement of the kinds of rewards that the partners supply one another and, thus increased interdependence” (p. 791). In this stage when one party fulfils his/her obligations exceeding expectations that party experiences an increase in attractiveness by the other party (Thibaut & Kelly 1959). In sales, this stage is operationalized by repeat purchases by the buyer from the same supplier. Dwyer, et al (1987) citing Frazier (1983), frame the expansion process as a result of the respective parties’ satisfaction with the other’s role performance. Therefore, in the expansion stage motivation to maintain the relationship increases as long as the exchange parties fulfil their obligations in an exemplary fashion (Dwyer et al. 1987).

### 2.4 Commitment

At the commitment stage the relational partners are satisfied with the relationship to the extent that they have nearly excluded other potential exchange partners (Dwyer et al. 1987). They also content that there are three criteria’s for commitment, inputs, durability and consistency. Input refers to a significant exchange of economic/emotional resources Durability refers to a continuation of the association over time; there is a continued investment in the relationship. Consistency refers to the degree to which inputs are made into the relationship over time. “A key distinction of the commitment phase is that the parties purposely engage resources to maintain the relationship,” Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 19) according to Dainton (2003) relationship maintenance refers to the activities individuals engage in to keep their relationship in the desired state.

Social media, such as Facebook, has been shown to be used for relationship maintenance by friends rather than those in romantic relationships (Houser, Fleuriet and Estrada 2012; Ellison et al. 2007). Dainton, (2013) speculates that social media may be useful in assisting in the maintenance of “weak ties” as opposed to maintaining more intimate relationships. He found that Facebook users indicate that the maintenance of relationships is their primary motive for using Facebook. He also found that maintenance behaviors on Facebook did not seem to improve relationship satisfaction beyond what is provided by general maintenance activity. According to Rabby and Walther (2003) the communication channel choice is less important than the content of the communication in the maintenance of relationships. This is important information for salespeople who are already using social media tools such as Facebook.

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In online dating relationships Sidelinger et al. (2008) found that assurances by the relational partners using computer mediated communication were positively correlated with commitment. They speculated that this may be a result of the lack of nonverbal cues in online communication causing relational partners to be more open with their verbal communication. A close relationship is defined by high levels of psychological intimacy, attachment, self-disclosure, perceived similarity and mutual support (Maxwell 1985). The frequency of online communication results in an increase in the degree of personal closeness in online communication and promotes a more supportive relationship (Dawson 2006; Haythornthwaite 2000).

### **2.5 Dissolution**

The possible disengagement from the relationships is the possible last stage of the relationship framework. Little is known about the disengagement process (Dwyer et al. 1987). While there is some research on the formation of computer-mediated relationships, “there is none on the topic of dissolution of such relationships” (Merkel & Richardson, 2000, p. 188). According to Duck (1982), dissolution begins when one of the relational partners begins to evaluate his/her dissatisfaction with the other party, eventually concluding the costs of continuing the relationship outweigh the benefits. One clear source of relationship dissatisfaction is conflict.

According to a few studies online communications contributes to conflict due to the lack of social cues and the reduction in the sense of impression management (Aitken & Shedletsky 2002; Whitty 2008). Blake and Mouton were the first to identify ways that individuals manage interpersonal conflict. Their five styles include problem-solving, smoothing, forcing, withdrawal and sharing (Blake & Mouton 1964). According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974) people distinguish between these five approaches depending on their level of self-concern and concern for the other individual. Other studies have shown that the selected conflict-management style is dependent on the degree of closeness in the relationship (Maxwell 1985). A close relationship is defined by high levels of psychological intimacy, attachment, self-disclosure, perceived similarity and mutual support (Maxwell 1985). Blake and Mouton’s (1974) model was based on a face-to-face model, according to Ishii’s (2010) findings “current online users may not recognize any differences from face-to-face interaction, particularly for close relationships, and online users may exercise the same conflict-management styles unconsciously as they do in face-to-face interaction,” (p. 368). Online users demonstrate a level of concern for the other individual by selecting cooperative styles to handle conflict in a close relationship. While people may not show a high degree of concern for an online partner when they experience conflict, they will be careful not to act self-centred or walk away if they want to maintain the relationship. In general people avoid inappropriate styles of managing conflict in an online environment if they intend to continue the online relationship (Ishii 2010).

In cyberspace it is easier to dissolve a relationship since it can be accomplished by simply no longer responding to communication attempts. In addition to conflict the extent to which there are desirable alternatives available and/or little has been invested in the relationship this may motivate dissolution of the cyber-relationship (Merkle & Richardson 2000).

### **3. Proposed Model for Developing Virtual Buyer-Seller Relationships**

Given what we have learned from online dating and the use of other online social tools to build virtual relationships we, propose that online dating and social media tools have the potential to serve as good tools for building the virtual buyer-seller relationship within the

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relationship building framework of Dweyer, et al (1987). Here we suggest a model for how salespeople can utilize those tools.

### 3.1 Awareness

In order to create awareness using technology sales people have a variety of tools at their disposal. According to Jennifer Fong, a direct sales social media expert, "Salespeople have been successful in blogging about issues related to the problems their products solve and participating in online forums where these topics are discussed. Meeting someone at their point of need with a solution, a salesperson can then create a lead who is interested in learning more about a product or service" (Smith 2013, p.26). Schultz et al. (2012) found that social media when it is used, "in the early stages of a customer relationship where awareness lead building and prospecting take place" (84). When the salesperson engages in knowledgeable blogging and/or participating in online forum discussions about solutions their products can solve; they are enhancing their attractiveness to potential customers and creating awareness. Salespeople can also tweet about the solutions they can provide and set up a professional Facebook page and create postings about solutions. If the product is tangible and a solution can be demonstrated, salespeople can create and post short YouTube videos showing the demonstration. Salespeople who utilized social media had higher levels of overall sales success.

### 3.2 Exploration

In the exploration stage the potential partners consider the requirements, benefits and liabilities of the potential relationship. As stated earlier, this stage has five sub processes, (1) attraction, (2) communication and bargaining, (3) development and exercise of power, (4) norm development, and (5) expectation development. As suggested by the literature salespeople can use technology in each of the five sub processes in the following ways.

(1) Attraction - Salespeople would be wise to adopt the same practices used by online daters when creating a Blog, LinkedIn, Twitter or Facebook page. Obviously, writing is critical; salespeople need to pay close attention to all aspects of their written communications from word choice to spelling to grammar. In the absence of other information prospective buyers will scrutinize written communications. Salespeople should also carefully consider the information that is included in their various online profiles. Online daters engage in information searching to determine the veracity of others' profiles and communications, sometimes simply by Googling them (Chih-Hui, Ellison & Gibbs 2009). It is to be expected that potential buyers would engage in the same behavior. Therefore, it would be wise for salespeople to monitor all online communications that identify them. For example, some individuals maintain a private and professional Facebook page. A Google search will turn up both. Even if the settings on the private page are set to private, the mere fact that the salesperson has two accounts with one having private settings may be interpreted negatively.

(2) Communication and bargaining - Salespeople can adopt the intense communication strategy used by online daters though carefully, by sharing possible solutions to typical customer problems unrelated to the product(s) they represent. This can be done through blogging or Tweeting. Salespeople can also relate carefully edited stories of everyday humorous events that may have happened to them. This last suggestion would require training, but has the potential to create that personal feeling.

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(3) Power and justice - This refers to the dependence one party has on the other. If one party is more dependent on the other, the other party has more power. Since the use of power is no conducive to building relationships it would be wise for salespeople to use technology in a way so as to emphasize common interests.

(4) Norm development – Sales people should adopt the same strategies as online daters and learn what key words and concepts signal commonalities to their prospects and use them in their communications. As a result when a potential buyer uses an online search engine to screen for potential buyers, the salesperson's online communications will result even if the product and or company's website does not.

(5) Expectations development – Trust is the key here; in an online environment salespeople can construct their profiles on social media sites, blogs and websites so as to provide the information that addresses source credibility. Salespeople must also recognize the importance buyers place on recommendations, comments and the reviews of others and participate in and leverage these communications (Seley 2011). Buyers just like online daters or online auction buyers will seek information about a potential supplier and that supplier's salesperson. For example, salespeople may want to consider soliciting online testimonials. In the past they would offer a hard-copy testimonial to a prospect now these testimonials could be posted to the various sites the salesperson is using. It is likely that buyers are willing to accept some "puffery" in a salesperson's communications, this would be akin to Ellison et al. (2006) "foggy mirror," however, communications that cross the line to misrepresentation will most likely be viewed as deceptive. Salespeople would be wise to monitor all their online communications and makes sure that they are as accurate as possible and consistent so as to improve source credibility.

Trust can also be built in little ways through the use of social media. Salespeople can do this by meeting the little needs that customers may express though the use of social media. They can provide information, share links, and respond to customers without the perception of a hard sell. Using social media in this way allows the salesperson to build his/her reputation for responsiveness and caring (Andzulis, Panagopoulos & Rapp 2012).

### **3.3 Expansion**

In sales this is generally characterized by repeat orders, with the size of the orders increasing in either size or frequency or both. The interaction between buyers and sellers to encourage the expansion of the relationship can be facilitated by a variety of electronic tools including texting, instant messaging, email, blogging, and social networking. According to Sashi (2012), these tools "enable more frequent, faster, and richer interactions among much larger groups of connected individuals and organizations or communities," (p. 261). Sellers can play an integral part in the formation of these communities and with the interaction they can "improve understanding of customer needs, especially changes in needs over time, and facilitate modifications to existing products or the development of new products to better satisfy these needs," (Sashi 2012, p. 261). This communication facilitates the ability of the seller to better serve the customer and results in an expansion of the relationship.

### **3.4 Commitment**

Salespeople can substitute some of the face-to-face follow-up communications with customers with technology like social media. At the same time salespeople would be well advised to be reminded of the lack of nonverbal cues in online communications and pay particular attention to the words they use in their online communications. Communication

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with customers should be very clear and customers should be frequently updated in regards to ongoing business activities between the parties so as to assure the customer that his/her interests are important. These assurances should facilitate the maintenance of the relationship, enhancing commitment.

In the sales environment respondents in Ferrell, Gonzales-Padron & Ferrell's (2010) study reported using email as the primary mode of maintaining personal contacts with customers; however, they were using it in more innovative ways. For example, the following were used, targeted emails with links to product Web sites, emails with embedded video and/or audio files including encouragement to reorder from the representatives. They found that for the respondents in their study, executives saw technology as an enhancement to the traditional model of sales. One company respondent encourages its sales representatives to establish their own web presence including the ability for those representatives to provide a full online shopping experience (Ferrell, Gonzales-Padron & Ferrell's 2010). These communications enhance the maintenance of the relationship.

### **3.5 Dissolution**

Salespeople would be well advised to remember to build value in the relationship with all communications. Without a perception of the salesperson and his/her product and company as a key partner it is very easy to terminate the relationship. One clear source of relationship dissatisfaction is conflict, therefore, they should be mindful of the communication itself and its' general tone and word choice. In the absence of visual cues full disclosure and careful word choice are extremely important to assist in avoiding perceptions of conflict. Finally, in order to preserve the relationship it is wise to choose a cooperative style when attempting to mediate conflict.

## **4. Summary, Conclusions and Limitations**

This theoretical study support and extends the literature by proposing the relationship building framework first proposed by Dwyer et al (1987) with adaptation is still relevant in today's technological society.

The study moves the literature forward by providing suggestions and conclusions on how to use technology tools in each phase of relationship building process. Given the technological tools currently available, we have the following conclusion and suggestions for salespeople.

To create Awareness salespeople should be active with all the online tools available, including LinkedIn, blogs, Twitter, Facebook and You-tube if appropriate. To facilitate the Exploration phase, salespeople should pay close attention to their profiles in the various social media to try to connect with buyers. Salespeople should also always remember that nothing is private on the Web, so all of their online interactions and presence should be designed to enhance their professional image so as to build credibility and trust. Salespeople can offer solutions to typical buyer problems that are unrelated to the products they represent in their online communications. Doing so helps establish them as experts and helps build credibility and trust. Salespeople may also consider soliciting testimonials from satisfied customers and adding them to their profiles. Again, these reviews help build trust.

When a purchase is secured at this stage the salesperson should provide timely clear communications with the buyer using email. Salespeople must be very responsive at this stage to customers' need providing them with information and/or any necessary assistance. This can be done electronically by providing instructions/assistance in an email, sharing links

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or uploading video. The salesperson need to establish a reputation for responsiveness and caring at this stage in order to facilitate trust.

The Expansion stage is characterized by repeat purchases. Salespeople need to encourage the expansion of the relationship though the use of a variety of electronic tools including texting, instant messaging, email, blogging, and social networking. Salespeople need to fulfil his/her obligations exceeding expectations that party experiences so as to increase in attractiveness by the other party. Salespeople need to frequently communicate with buyers at this point so as to facilitate the ability of the seller to better serve the customer resulting in an expansion of the relationship, through keeping abreast of buyer needs as they change over time.

In the Commitment phase salespeople can use social media to maintain the relationship. Social media has been shown to be particularly useful in maintaining weak ties as opposed to intimate ties and this characterizes the buyer-seller relationship well. In the absence of face-to-face contact customers should be frequently updated in regards to ongoing business activities between the parties so as to assure the customer that his/her interests are important. These assurances should facilitate the maintenance of the relationship, enhancing commitment.

While little is known about the Dissolution phase, it is clear that one source of dissolution is conflict. In cyberspace conflict is often due to the lack of social cues and the reduction in the sense of impression management. Therefore, sales people must realize that in the absence of visual cues full disclosure and careful word choice are extremely important to assist in avoiding perceptions of conflict. Care should be taken in all written communications so as to avoid any misunderstanding.

It is important to note that this theoretical study is not without limitations. First, because this study is a theoretical examination of the literature and no data has been collected it is limited. Little research has been done examining the relationship process even though the concept of establishing and developing business relationships has been the subject of business research for some time, surprisingly little is known about the motivations behind these relationships and how those business relationships are initiated and developed between buyer and seller (Halinen 1997; Harris, O'Malley, & Patterson, 2003; Morgan 2000; Wilkeinson, et al 2005; Mortsen 2012).

Secondly, there is a gap within the literature from 1987 to present with limited to no research on the model in its entirety and during the ensuing period the model has not reflected the change in technology. Given that the buyer-seller relationship process has been based upon face-to face interactions, there is limited research on virtual relationship building. Therefore, this theoretical study proposes future directions.

However, given the economic impact of today's environment, the significance of this study is timely and essential for the success of salespeople. This theoretical study provides a new framework for sales people to follow in order to create virtual relationships in the global market.

Clearly future research should look at each of the stages to attempt to determine how the tools are being used and which lead to greater success. Future research should not only investigate what salespeople are doing but should also look at buyer reactions to the various tools.

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