An exploration of the differences in physical and digital sales meetings.

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Abstract

In modern sales, buyers are increasingly preferring using digital means of communication, yet many sellers feel that connecting with buyers online is more difficult. This project aims to analyze this issue by looking into the differences that are found between digital and physical sales meetings. By categorizing the different elements of a sales meeting the project will illuminate all the specific differences that can be found as well as how those differences affect the meeting. Secondary data from scientific articles and statistics are used to conduct a thorough literature review, the project then uses primary data from an interview to compare the literature with the real-life experience of salespeople. Major takeaways from the project describe how rapport building is significantly altered by the differences between digital and physical meetings, in addition, complex sales meetings are also affected by the differences.

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1 Introduction

Marketing and sales are changing at a rapid rate. The influx of digital tools specifically has impacted the way companies approach sales and communication with potential clients and suppliers. More communication and interaction have moved online. The traditional face-to-face meetings that were the cornerstone of communication and interaction between salespeople and customers are no longer dominant. The covid 19 pandemic especially accelerated this change, making it less gradual and more of a sudden shift, as many companies were forced to rely on digital meetings as opposed to traditional face-to-face meetings, even if those companies had preferred the latter.(Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021)

With most of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic now lifted, companies are in the challenging position of whether they should decide to fully embrace this new type of communication and interaction with customers, or if they should instead refocus on the methods they had previously utilized for many years.(Hartmann & Lussier, 2020)

Additionally, the rapid change has resulted in less time for companies and researchers to fully study this phenomenon, leading to companies and salespeople having a more difficult time weighing the different options available to them when it comes to how they communicate and interact with their customers. (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020)

The relationship and dynamic between sellers and buyers has also shifted as information is more readily available with companies spending significantly more time researching and finding information online before making contact with other

companies. (Syam & Sharma, 2018). 60 percent of B2B customers prefer to not have salespeople be their primary source of information, with 62 percent of buyers preferring to do their own research online(Wizdo, 2017).

B2B buyers are increasingly choosing to do business online with salespeople as opposed to face-to-face physical meetings due to the added convenience, opting for digital channels for communication(Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). Customers are increasingly expecting companies to have digital channels for communication and interactions. (Gavin, Harrison, Lun Plotkin, Spillecke, & Stanley, 2020). This new dynamic puts further pressure on companies to adapt to digital meetings to communicate and interact with their customers.

While digital tools are invaluable and companies that effectively utilize these tools are seeing much faster growth, than companies that adhere to more standard and analog processes, this rapid change is not something that should necessarily go unexamined, as elements from more traditional sales communication, can still have a place in the modern sales world, here namely the concept of the human element.(Angevine, Plotkin, & Stanley, 2018). This can be seen in the context of all the physical and psychological elements that can influence the outcome and success of interactions between actors and companies, in this case between sellers and buyers.

So while the entire process of sales has been heavily altered by the digital transformation, one notable aspect of sales that has been particularly affected is sales meetings. The act of sellers meeting with clients, suppliers, and other parties, has been greatly affected by the rising prevalence of digital sales meetings(Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021).

With digital sales meetings being preferred by so many buyers, and more and more companies embracing these types of meetings, it is safe to say that this development will only continue. Therefore the differences that these new digital meetings could have could be beneficial to analyze further. Specifically, the differences that can be found in the communication that happens during these meetings, with one example being the nonverbal communication that happens during a meeting. This is important as nonverbal communication has a noticeable impact on the effectiveness of sales meetings in general(Peterson, 2005).

1.1 Problem area

With the digitalization of sales meetings being so prevalent, the interesting aspect is how this has affected sellers and clients. This new type of digital interaction between sellers and clients has been studied to have a rather significant effect. One study found that 80 percent of sellers had trouble connecting with clients online in the same way that they had physically(Showpad, 2023). Furthermore, there is a call for more research on the general effectiveness of sellers using digital meetings. (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). The rapid change of digital meetings becoming dominant and the lack of studies done on the effectiveness of salespeople using digital meetings rather than physical meetings leads to a research gap. This therefore creates a dilemma in which buyers in the B2B industry increasingly prefer to utilize digital meetings for communication and interaction, in contrast to sellers where a significant percentage of sellers feel that digital meetings are impeding their effectiveness in connecting with their customers and building up a relationship. It is

therefore an interesting dilemma to examine in order to uncover more information about this new change.

To further refine this dilemma into a research question that could provide specific insight, some key aspects need to be refined.

Specifically, the project will focus on sales meetings with new clients. This is due to the increased pressure on these meetings as neither side has an established relationship with each other, and key elements such as trust have not been established.

Furthermore, studies show that customers are more interested in face-to-face interaction at the start of the buying journey as opposed to the later stages(Angevine, Plotkin, & Stanley, 2018). The start of the buying journey when dealing with new suppliers is also where buyers feel the most amount of uncertainty and perceived risk. It is also more expensive to acquire new customers for companies than to maintain established customers, making the beginning of a new sales relationship a bigger investment(Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2015).

Therefore researching this specific area could provide beneficial knowledge that could provide value to many companies who have specific important clients, especially as digital sales meetings are only going to become more commonplace around the world, as explained earlier. However, before differences in these meetings can be fully examined it is important to define the specific structure of the sales meeting in order to have a framework that the analysis can revolve around. Therefore another important aspect of the project is the different elements of a sales meeting sorted into categories, that will then be explored in the literature review and

utilized in the analysis. As there is a research gap in this area the results can be valuable for discussing how the digital meetings lead to salespeople struggling with connecting with customers. It also opens up the possibility for further research on the dilemma using knowledge created to potentially reduce the problem in the future. With this in mind, the project can create a research question that seeks to illuminate the differences between physical and digital sales meetings with new clients. This has led to the following research question:

What are the major differences between digital and physical sales meetings with new clients?

This research question can help illuminate how digital meetings affect the interaction between clients and salespeople, along with what parts of the meeting are affected the most and in what ways. Additionally, it can help guide further discussion on the effectiveness of both types of meetings.

2 Methodology

In this section, the methodological choices made in the project will be outlined and explained. This explanation will consist of several segments. This will assist the reader in gaining a more thorough understanding of the choices made in the project and the research question, as well as how the structure of the project will influence the results.

2.1 Philosophy of science

The philosophy of science refers to the way we perceive the world and the systems of belief and assumptions that influence how knowledge is created.(Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2011)

Understanding the assumptions will help guide our understanding of reality and how to best study it. Critically it will help enable the articulation of our knowledge about the world. With different schools of thought on the nature of reality and the creation of knowledge, the research philosophy of a researcher or a project is an important part of the methodology of the project. Additionally, it plays a role in shaping the actual goal of the research and what kind of knowledge is expected to be created along with how this newly created knowledge can then be interpreted and utilized. (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2022)

This project is written from the perspective of critical realism as the philosophy of science. The considerations made for the choice of analysis, data, and what the findings of the project mean, are all informed by the critical realist way of thinking. This philosophy of science focuses on trying to explain the reality that can be seen and experienced, this is accomplished by diving deeper into the underlying structures and systems that shape the reality that can be consciously observed(Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009). Therefore reality is not directly observable and is independent of our own understanding and experiences. So in order to understand the world there are two separate steps according to critical realism. Firstly there are the sensations and events that are experienced and felt by people, these are the things we can directly observe or feel. Secondly, there is a mental process that involves working backwards to those experiences in order to study and explain the

underlying reality that could have potentially caused these events and sensations.(Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009)

In the context of this project and its research question, the main problem of why some sellers are having trouble connecting with buyers in online meetings, is not something that is directly observable. Instead, the underlying structures and mechanisms that cause this issue can be examined and thereafter analyzed to provide a better understanding of why the issue persists.

2.2 The two dimensions of critical realism

One of the main aspects of critical realism is the way it divides science into two dimensions, namely the transitive and the intransitive domains. The transitive domain refers to our knowledge of the world, it encompasses all the theories, paradigms, ideas, concepts, data, etc. that currently already exist. This knowledge is then what is utilized to, in turn, create new knowledge, therefore the creation of new knowledge is done by transforming and building upon pre-existing knowledge(Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020).

The intransitive domain on the other hand refers to the knowledge *of* something that is produced by science. Essentially the intransitive domain consists of the objects of science that researchers study. As critical realism states that true knowledge exists independently of our own understanding this means that the intransitive objects that researchers study, do not change based on the perception or understanding of researchers. These two domains are to be understood as separate so that a change

in transitive knowledge or a change in intransitive objects does not necessitate a corresponding change of each other(Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020).

This project will then use the pre-existing knowledge from the transitive domain about sales meetings and human behavior to attempt to gain a better understanding of the intransitive domain of sales.

2.3 Systems approach

As this project is written from the perspective of the critical realism philosophy of science, the systems approach will be utilized. In the systems approach, researchers attempt to gain a better understanding of reality by studying the underlying systems that influence what researchers can observe and measure. The interaction between these systems is crucial as understanding the relationship between the different systems is necessary to gain a more complete understanding of reality. As a result of this, the systems approach has a holistic view of reality, in that it is necessary to understand how a system interacts with other systems in order to understand it, and you cannot therefore analyze a system without also analyzing its relationships(Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009).

In this project, there will therefore be several elements of sales meetings and human behavior that will be studied and compared in order to gain a better understanding and create new knowledge.

2.4 Validity and reliability

Validity is essential when it concerns creating new knowledge, as the validity ensures the quality of the new knowledge. Validity refers to how accurate and valid the measurement is when creating new knowledge. (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009)

A common way of ensuring validity in the systems approach is to incorporate as many viewpoints as possible, in order to study phenomena from many different angles. In this project, one of the ways this is achieved is by including many different scientific articles to examine the various parts of sales meetings and human behavior, in order to create a more nuanced and wide view of them.

Reliability refers to the quality of data, both primary and secondary.(Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009)

The secondary data in this project will mainly consist of scientific articles from academic journals and statistical data from organizations. To achieve the highest amount of reliability from the many sources utilized in the project, the citations from individual scientific articles are used to measure if the article provides satisfactory information. The amount of citations is weighted against the age of the article and the average number of citations found in that particular field of study. This is due to the project using articles from several fields of study such as business, communication, and psychology.

The primary data from this project comes from an interview with the director of Scan Client Publishing. Scan Client Publishing is a company that focuses on media and information. This interview was then transcribed and made into an appendix so that it could be referenced in the project.

2.5 Ethics

To ensure that the project is created responsibly and ethically this project follows the guidelines on responsible research practice as defined by Aalborg University. This is to ensure the highest amount of transparency, honesty, trust, and well-being of all who participated in the project.(Aalborg University, 2023)

The participant of the interview was informed about the objective of the research and fully aware of all that it entailed. Permission was given to record and transcribe the interview before the beginning of the interview and the privacy of the interviewee was fully respected and therefore the participant is only ever referred to by their title. The data collected was solely used to inform the project and answer the research question.

2.6 Project structure

The structure of this project contains several main parts starting with the introduction to the relevant topics and dilemmas for the project. Afterwards, the methodology of the project is described. Then a literature review is conducted to give the project a theoretical background and provide more context, as well as inform the analysis. Next is the analysis of the project. This is then followed by a discussion of the findings from the project. Lastly, the project concludes with a section on the limitations of the project and the conclusion of the project itself, followed by the list of references used.

This project is structured in a way that is best able to explore the nature of both physical and digital sales meetings, with an extensive literature review informing the analysis. The analysis of this project will outline the various steps of a sales meeting

as defined by the project itself. The literature review will use existing literature on sales to properly define the specific elements that make up a sales meeting. This structure can then be utilized for comparison, with digital sales meetings.

To create a more cohesive structure for the literature review and the analysis the elements of a sales meeting will be categorized into three different categories. An additional category was created named "Sales meeting timeline" that focuses on how the different elements of the sales meeting derived from the three categories interact with the timeline of sales meeting, with an emphasis on the beginning and ending of meetings. This was done to create a greater understanding of where in the meeting the different elements were more prominent. Additionally, it allows the project to explore if there are notable differences in how digital and physical sales meetings start, progress, and end.

After the literature review, the analysis will utilize the data obtained from the interview to compare to the literature. Due to the research gap, there are some categories where the differences in physical and sales meetings are less explored, and instead, the project argues for the potential differences, which will also be compared to the data obtained from the interview.

Lastly, the project will discuss the implications of the results obtained from the analysis. This will help illuminate how the results can be useful for companies and how further research can be done to further explore the problem and research gap.

2.7 Interview process

In order to best answer the research question the semi-structured interview will be utilized. The director of the company Scan Client Publishing will be interviewed on

their many years of experience with both physical and online sales meetings, along with their knowledge about other salespeople on their staff and their experience.

The semi-structured interview has the benefit of allowing the interviewee to speak more freely while still giving the interview itself a clear structure and goal. Rather than having a completely predetermined set of questions asked in a fixed order, the semi-structured interview allows for more adaptability depending on the flow of the conversation, this also crucially allows for follow-up questions to further explore topics. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This fits well with the purpose of the project to explore the nature of online and physical sales meetings, as opposed to answering a specific hypothesis, especially since the research gap leads to an exploration of the topic with a more open-minded way of creating knowledge.

The semi-structured interview relies on themes based on the topic, in this project those themes are structured as categories defining the nature of a sales meeting.

If an emergent topic or issue is raised in the interview the interviewer has the ability to follow up and explore. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015)

This is especially important in this project as the research gap presents the ability for new information to arise from the interview that had not been previously described, but that could still be invaluable data to help answer the research question. This helps the interview create richer qualitative data by allowing the interviewer and interviewee to dive deeper into these emergent topics. This freedom also assists the interview due to the context-heavy nature of the topic, namely how sales meetings are more subjective in nature.(Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017)

The interview was conducted online through Zoom, and the questions were structured in the same categories used in the literature review.

When presenting the interview in this project the interviewer will be referred to as Interviewer and the interviewee will be referred to as Director.

3 Literature review

In this section, the previously written literature that is relevant to the project will be reviewed. The aim is to produce an overview of the relevant literature and to further define how different concepts and terms are meant to be understood in the context of the project.

3.1 Modern Sales

In order to examine how the new form of digital meetings has impacted salespeople, first it's beneficial to explore how the technology has changed sales and the history of it. This will help create a better context for the environment in which digital sales meetings take place. It's not just the sales profession itself that has changed but also the environment around it along with the expectations and goals for customers.(Syam & Sharma, 2018). Though with the focus of the project being centered on sales meetings, this is the part of sales specifically that will be examined to create an overview of what changes have occurred with the advent of digital tools. As described in the introduction, digital tools enable companies to grow at a much faster rate, which among other things has led digital tools to be widely utilized by

companies around the world. As part of this new digital transformation, there is one element known as digitalization which is relevant for this project's research question. Digitalization refers to how IT and digital tools change the business practices and processes of firms. Part of this is using digital tools to enhance the user experience for customers(Li, Nucciarelli, Roden, & Graham, 2016).

In terms of sales meetings, one of the ways that digitalization has had a large impact is the interaction and relationship dynamics between buyers and sellers. As a part of this, the way buyers communicate with sellers and companies has changed.
As a result of the digital transformation, the sales process is no longer linear and is more multifaceted. Due to digital tools such as the Internet, customers are much more knowledgeable, and therefore the interaction between seller and buyer is not dominated by one party (Syam & Sharma, 2018). Business interactions and communications also no longer happen through a single communication channel such as a phone call, digital tools have opened up many new channels of communication for customers. This led to a multichannel form of communication where communication happened on different channels. This has then evolved into the newer concept of omni channel, where customers can expect to interact with companies through whatever form of communication they request at any moment in the buying journey(Angevine, Plotkin, & Stanley, 2018).

One way that customers are more informed is through social media such as LinkedIn. Customers will often use these platforms to seek out information about companies very early in the sales process, this works similarly for sellers in that they also use these platforms to gather information on clients. This can lead sellers to

already have an understanding of a client's needs and business practices before the initial interactions such as a sales meeting, even allowing them to tailor solutions before the initial sales meeting(Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson, & Pullins, 2021). With both sellers and buyers being more knowledgeable about the other party before interactions start, the traditional need for information sharing is greatly diminished and other aspects of sales interactions become more prevalent.

With customers not simply being receivers of information from sellers, the dynamic changes. The communications between sellers and buyers become more interactive, especially during sales meetings. With this in mind trust between both parties is more important than ever. The sharing of knowledge and exploring of ideas between buyers and sellers leads to a kind of value created through interaction and unplanned encounters. This type of value creation is very human-driven and necessitates an understanding between buyer and seller that goes beyond the simple exchange of information. (Syam & Sharma, 2018)

The importance of value creation in the interaction between buyer and seller is only increasing with more customers limiting the number of companies they work with, focusing more on strategic partnerships, making it more difficult for sellers to acquire new customers(Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017).

This means that the extra effort required to form a longer-lasting and closer relationship between customer and seller is justified more frequently. This in turn puts more pressure on sellers on the initial interaction between seller and buyer as this is where customers are most interested in personal interaction and asking questions as opposed to later on in the relationship where speed and efficiency are more valued(Angevine, Plotkin, & Stanley, 2018).

Despite the seller's best efforts in research and preparation, sales meetings themselves and especially initial sales meetings are idiosyncratic in nature, making them more chaotic and less predictable.(Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017) (Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015). This in turn puts more importance on adapting to the customer and their needs, taking in as much information as possible from the initial sales meeting, and using it effectively in making interactions that create value. One aspect of gathering this information is the act of active listening, being present and genuinely listening. While salespeople acknowledge that this is an important aspect, it was found that many buyers often did not feel as if sellers were actively listening, evidenced by the seller not showing visible interest in what the buyers were saying, and the seller not managing to successfully adapt and adjust the dialogue accordingly(Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017). This expectation correlates well with what was previously discussed on the more adaptable nature of modern sales meetings as sellers who utilize active listening are more adaptable in business interactions. (Shepherd, Castleberry, & Ridnour, 1997)

Buyers and sellers not having the same expectations in areas such as this for sales interactions, leads to dissatisfaction from the buyer, which can severely hamper the effectiveness of those sales interactions, especially if the goal is to create and maintain longer-lasting business relationships (Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017). Making this an important but perhaps overlooked aspect of the new nature of sales meetings. The customer's perception of whether or not the seller is genuinely listening is one of the many aspects of sales meetings that rely on perception. In line with the nature of sales meetings, the customer's perceived value

from the meeting does not come from an objective set of criteria but rather their own perception of the product or service that is being offered along with the relationship between the buyer and seller and even their perception of the seller themselves. Therefore sellers rely entirely on the interpretations of the buyer. (Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017)

This circles back to the need for information gathering during meetings, as buyers have needs that they do not explicitly communicate, which requires interpretation to uncover. Successful sales meetings then entail sellers both interpreting the buyer's needs and guiding along with buyers' own interpretation, giving the customer the perception that they are important and valued. (Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017)

Building on what was written earlier on the new omni-channel form of communication and business interactions between buyer and seller, another effect that can be observed is that with the many communication channels all supplying information and demanding attention, it leads to a sort of information overload for many buyers. This means that business interactions can sometimes feel overwhelming for buyers(Biemans, 2023).

The aspect of modern sales meetings that this project is most interested in investigating, is the nature of digital sales meetings. Digital sales meetings can be categorized as Digital sales interactions or DSI, which can be defined as technology-enhanced face-to-face digital meetings(Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). These digital sales interactions allow convenient communication between buyers and sellers. For the remainder of this project, these types of digital sales interactions will simply be referred to as digital meetings.

As was mentioned in 1 Introduction the majority of B2B buyers prefer utilizing this form of communication when interacting with sellers. Despite this shift, there is not enough research that has been conducted on the effectiveness of the communication that takes place in these digital meetings. While digital meetings are more information rich than a telephone encounter due to the visual aspect, it is still not nearly as information rich as a physical encounter between buyer and seller(Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020).

In terms of the overall changes that digital tools have brought to sales interactions, there are some stand-out changes for sales meetings specifically, that can be found in the previously written literature. One of the biggest changes that can be observed is that digital meetings are more task oriented than physical meetings. This means that digital meetings are more centered on the specific agenda set for that particular meeting. This means that digital meetings have less room for emerging or side topics that might otherwise be explored in a meeting if the interactions naturally lead to them. This also means that digital meetings have less room for non-business related discussions, which especially impacts the amount of small talk naturally seen in digital meetings compared to physical meetings(Biemans, 2023).

3.2 Sales Meeting

The next part of the literature review will go over relevant literature concerning sales meetings specifically. The structure and timeline of a sales meeting will be defined and literature on the different elements of a sales meeting will be examined. Specifically, this project divides these elements into 3 main categories: Verbal

communication, nonverbal communication, and physical space. Each of these categories will also have their own subcategories. The aim of this segment is to create an overview of the different elements of a sales meeting to better compare how physical and digital sales meetings differ, and what those differences look like in each category. The last category named Sales meeting timeline will look at the sales meeting chronologically and incorporate knowledge from the other categories.

3.3 Verbal communication

As verbal communication does not currently define one distinct subfield in communication(Saussure & Rocci, 2016) this project will define verbal communication as all spoken communication between two or more parties. Essentially verbal communication is the verbal content or words. In terms of this project, only the communication that occurs during a sales meeting will be included. Therefore the verbal communication will be sorted into specific categories relevant to communication during an initial sales meeting. These categories are presentation and informal communication.

As mentioned in 3.1 modern sales with the more modern dynamic back-and-forth interaction between the buyer and seller, the verbal communication in sales meetings is now more equal between both participants, meaning that sellers are not just interested in using their own verbal communication to interact with the customer, but are also very interested in engaging the customer and facilitating more verbal communication from them.

3.3.1 Presentation

Presentation refers to verbal communication around the product or service that the seller is presenting to the client. This often includes demonstrating the value or benefits of the product, as well as arguments for why the clients should invest. (Dubinsky, 1981)

Though the seller is presenting their own product the nature of the presentation has evolved significantly. In recent years the presentation is often tailored specifically to the client and their needs with a larger emphasis on meeting their unique goals. Due to the major shift in dynamics between buyer and seller, recently the presentation is often less in focus than the discussion with the clients, in this way interactions between both the seller and the customer are more of a focus(Syam & Sharma, 2018).

This shift is more prevalent with long-term high-value business relationships between buyer and seller where a more collaborative equal relationship is desired. Despite this standardized sales presentations are still used often in the interest of time and resources. In scenarios where there is not an expectation of a long-term relationship standardized presentations are still used for their practicality. (Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017)

Recently sales presentations tailored specifically to the buyer and their needs and interests have become more expected from buyers. Rather than being seen as a bonus the tailored presentation has increasingly become the standard in sales presentation. Despite the shift in expectations from buyers, standard sales presentations are still commonly used and this has created a mismatch in the expectations of the customers and the sellers in sales meetings. This creates friction between the respective parties as unmet expectations are a major barrier to

successful and efficient meetings. (Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017)

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In terms of the content of the presentation, it's common for salespeople to visualize the product or service in some way for the customer. This might involve physically showing the product or offering so that the customer can experience the benefits firsthand. Often this involves a demonstration of the product or service, where the seller actively showcases how the product or offering can be used and more importantly how it can provide value tailored specifically to the customer's needs and interests. One of the main benefits of these types of demonstrations is how they make the product or offering more tangible and relatable for the customers, assisting in giving the customers a more practical understanding of the benefits that the product or offering could bring. (Dubinsky, 1981)

Another technique used is making comparisons to other existing products or services, as a helpful shorthand for letting the customer quickly gain an understanding of the offering. This is a helpful shorthand that cuts down time on the expository information that was previously established to be of much less interest to the customer than more interactive parts of the meeting. Though this part of the sales meeting is less interactive due to the need for the seller to provide important information about their offering to the client, many salespeople will ask questions, making sure that the client is engaged and fully understands the offering. In addition to this, it's common for salespeople to engage in techniques that can help boost the engagement of the customer during parts of the meeting that are less interactive. This can for example include some form of showmanship or dramatization to

reinforce a point during the presentation, but also to keep the attention and engagement of the customer. (Dubinsky, 1981)

Reinforcing the previous points, managing customer distractions or moments of absent-mindedness from customers during the sales meeting is quite an important skill for salespeople to possess, especially during the sales presentation that is less dynamic and more information-filled than other parts of the meeting. Therefore sellers must be able to read the customer's body language and recognize when their attention and engagement begin to falter. When this happens, being able to intervene and recapture their attention when it seems to be lost is crucial for the seller. (Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021).

The different circumstances that the digital form of communication creates in digital meetings make it a more difficult task to maintain the full attention and engagement of the customer. Whether the video call is done through the phone or a computer, it is still a digital screen vying for the attention of the customer along with the seller. Studies show that customers are significantly more likely to be distracted by their computer or by other screens during a digital meeting when compared to a physical face-to-face meeting(Kaski, Timo, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018).

One of the key takeaways from this is that in modern sales meetings, many buyers have expressed that the traditional presentations made by sellers did not hold particular interest to them the way they might have in the past. Buyers today are significantly more engaged by active back-and-forth dialogue, and they feel that this type of interaction in sales meetings leads to more promising results(Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017). With buyers less interested in the

presentation part of a sales meeting, it makes it even more difficult for sellers to maintain the complete attention of buyers during that part of the sales meeting.

3.3.2 Informal communication

In this project, informal communication refers to all the communication done in the sales meeting that is not related to the business at hand. It often includes things such as small talk. It also includes the concept of second stories. Informal communication during sales meetings is seen as an important part of building rapport between sellers and clients, creating a common tone and consensus between the two parties that helps achieve a smoother, more productive meeting(Kaski, Timo, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018). With this in mind, informal communication can be seen as more crucial during initial sales meetings where there is less commonality and understanding between buyers and sellers. Despite informal communication being technically unrelated to the business it is often seen as a crucial part of a successful meeting by sellers, especially in the context of sellers wishing to build rapport with a client for a longer-lasting relationship, it is therefore widely utilized during sales meetings(Kaski, Timo, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018).

3.3.2.1 Small talk

In the context of this project and answering the research question, small talk refers to non-business related communication that might occur during a sales meeting (Kaski, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018). Small talk includes non-business related discussion and information, for example, impersonal statements, with a famous example being talking about the weather(Gremler & Gwinner, 2008), but it can also include more

personal discussions, such as backgrounds and personal interests(Jacobs, Evans, Kleine, & Landry, 2001). While seemingly trivial there are many benefits that can arise from utilizing small talk during sales meetings(Kaski, Timo, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018). While the use of small talk can have significant positive effects on the outcomes of sales meetings, specifically when it comes to building rapport between customers and sellers, it is not a tool that will always guarantee a more successful sales meeting, and it will have different effects based on the customer, their needs and the context surrounding the meeting, especially the intended relationship between the buyer and seller. Therefore the seller should attempt to the best of their ability to ascertain the customer's receptiveness to small talk before utilizing it in a sales meeting (Wiener, Flaherty, & Wiener, 2023). Additionally, the goal of the meeting also plays a part in how the sellers should determine the usefulness of small talk. As rapport building is one of the main benefits of utilizing small talk, whether or not the sales meeting is meant to be building a longer relationship or if it's a one-time sale, can help decide if small talk should be utilized. In some sales contexts such as a one-time transaction or similar, creating a bond or a connection between the seller and buyers is not always a priority or worth the time and resources needed to do so (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997).

One of the ways in which small talk can assist in creating a more successful sales meeting is by reducing uncertainty and anxiety at the beginning of a sales meeting. By utilizing small talk at the beginning of a meeting the customer can be eased into the conversation more smoothly, making the customer feel more comfortable as a result(Coupland, J., Coupland, & Robinson, 1992).

Due to this positive effect of small talk, it is logical why small talk is considered more effective than usual with more novice customers, who have less experience. Studies have shown that small talk is more effective with customers who have less experience with sales meetings, and who may not have interacted as much with different sellers and in different scenarios. On the other hand, this also means utilizing small talk in sales meetings with more experienced customers is going to be less effective as the calming effects that help reduce uncertainty and anxiety are not as needed due to the customer's general experience with sales meetings (Wiener, Flaherty, & Wiener, 2023). This is another way in which salespeople should be mindful of when small talk is best utilized based on the customer that they are interacting with.

In terms of the content of small talk one of the most famous and enduring examples of impersonal statements is talking about the weather. Despite seeming very trivial, there is a reason why it is such a common example in small talk including in sales meetings. In transactional discourse such as sales meetings, each participant plays their respective role as seller and buyer, yet talking about the weather lets these participants converse as individuals due to them conversing about a shared experience for both. This makes it a useful tool for obtaining a bit of solidarity between buyer and seller by emphasizing a shared experience. This moves the interaction from a strictly transactional exchange to a more personalized exchange between the buyer and seller. (Coupland, N. & Ylänne-McEwen, 2000).
In this context, the weather acts as a neutral topic of discussion that affects both parties simultaneously and presumably in the same way, thus quickly establishing common ground between both parties through their shared experience.

This informal way of discussing the weather is so ubiquitous that weather forecasters would speak about the weather in the way of small talk to make purely transactional pieces of information more sociable and entertaining for viewers(Coupland, N. & Ylänne-McEwen, 2000).

This concept aligns well with what was previously written in 3.1 Modern Sales and 3.3.1 presentation, namely that modern sales interactions are more collaborative in nature and that purely transactional exchanges of information such as standardized sales presentations were favored less and less by buyers. Therefore it stands to reason that the simple act of discussing the weather still has a role to play in modern sales interactions, due to it being a tool used for achieving a sense of solidarity between buyer and seller through a universal shared experience that can be used in almost any context. This serves as an example of the effectiveness of the shared experience in quickly establishing rapport between the buyer and seller in sales meetings.

As discussed in 3.1 modern sales digital meetings are more task oriented with less room for spontaneous and non-business related discussion. This has the effect of reducing the amount of small talk seen in the meetings and possibly the positive effects that small talk can have on building rapport. Digital meetings over larger distances also impact possible topics such as discussing the weather, since although it's still possible to discuss the weather, the shared experience that occurs normally is not there, due to the participants not experiencing the same weather. The lesser possibility of building solidarity through small talk about shared experiences could then further disincentivize small talk during digital meetings.

3.3.2.2 Second story

Second story refers to sellers responding to a client's story or experience with a similar story or experience. The main benefit of using the second story as a technique is that it can help achieve a sense of familiarity between seller and client. Through the act of sharing personal anecdotes, the seller can foster a sense of connection and relatability in turn leading to a diminished feeling of the two parties as strangers(Sacks & Jefferson, 1992). Shifting the transactional interaction to a more personal one is another way in which the seller can help build rapport and establish a foundation of trust with the customer. Similarly to small talk as discussed earlier it acts as a form of common ground for both parties to engage in during the sales meeting, changing the perception that the customer has of the interaction(Kaski, Timo, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018).

As highlighted earlier in 3.1 Modern Sales the act of active listening was an area where customers expressed dissatisfaction and did not feel that sellers were matching their expectations. By sharing a second story relevant to what the customer is discussing during informal communication the seller can subtly but directly meet this expectation guiding the customer's perception of how engaged the seller is with the customer and therefore removing the negative dissatisfaction that occurs when there is a mismatch between the customers expectations and what they perceive during a sales meeting. In this way, the second story can act as a clear indicator of active listening and can help convince the customer of the seller's willingness to engage with the customer.

3.4 Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication refers to communication that is not expressed in words. This type of communication consists of 3 main categories, Body language, Paralanguage, and Proxemics (Pauser & Wagner, 2019).

Nonverbal communication can have a significant effect on the outcome of a sales meeting(Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020), which is logical given that nonverbal communication makes up a large part if not the majority of communication(Park & Park, 2018).

In sales meetings sellers both use nonverbal communication but also spend time and energy on reading the nonverbal communication from the client, therefore it is a two-way process, where it is both important to communicate effectively non verbally and also be able to read and interpret nonverbal communication(Pauser & Wagner, 2019).

3.4.1 Body Language

Body Language as a form of nonverbal communication is defined as the movements of a person's body. This includes things such as hand movements and eye contact(Williams, Spiro, & Fine, 1990). Through many studies it has been established that a substantial part of communication between individuals is conducted through body language, rather than verbal communication, serving as a clear example of its fundamental role in how people convey meaning and intention during communication. (Park & Park, 2018) (Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021). Generally, sellers who use more body language and gestures appropriate to the

context of the situation are perceived to be more persuasive(Pauser, Wagner, & Ebster, 2018).

The movement of a person's body during communication functions both as a deliberate conscious action, yet also something that is done passively while communicating unintentionally revealing more of the speaker's feelings and intentions. This also lets speakers gather information by reading both the deliberate and passive body language of the other speaker.(Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021) Given that body language is an important part of communication in general, it is no surprise that there has been a wealth of research conducted on studying how body language affects business interactions and how it can be best utilized as a tool during sales meetings(Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020).

However, despite the importance of body language in sales meetings and business interactions, there is still a noticeable gap in the literature on how digital meetings affect the use of body language(Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020).

Gestures can have a significant impact on the perception that buyers have of sellers and the value of the meeting itself. As discussed in 3.1 modern sales sellers should guide the buyer's interpretation such that the buyer perceives that the seller considers them important and valued. Gestures can both deliberately assist in making the customer feel more valued, but also they can unintentionally cause the opposite effect. One example of this is how a salesperson looking at their watch or otherwise unintentionally making gestures that imply impatience can give the customers the perception that they are not being valued and that the seller does not wish or feels it is not worth it to devote time to them(Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015).

As discussed in 3.1 Modern Sales, customers greatly appreciate active listening from the seller, yet it was often found that customers did not perceive that salespeople were genuinely listening. Body language plays a part in this, as one of the ways that buyers were discerning whether or not the seller was actively listening, was through their body language and whether it conveyed active listening as opposed to disinterest.(Kaski, Timo Arvid, Hautamaki, Pullins, & Kock, 2017)

Specifically, eye contact is one of the most important forms of nonverbal communication when it comes to showing interest and engagement. It strengthens the perception of the buyer that the seller is engaged and actively listening(Wohltjen & Wheatley, 2021).

Eye contact or eye gaze is one of the most fundamental and effective nonverbal cues in communication. It constitutes a large part of nonverbal communication on its own.(Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021). In business interactions maintaining meaningful eye contact is a significant tool for building trust and rapport with customers. Customers are more likely to feel heard and understood when the seller engages with them visually(Leigh & Summers, 2002). Though like many other nonverbal gestures it is not a tool that can be used indiscriminately with consideration of context and the receiver of the gaze. When used thoughtfully and at the right moment it can be a powerful tool in building rapport but used excessively or improperly can have the opposite effect and potentially create a feeling of discomfort for the customer. There are negative qualities that are attributed to improper or inopportune use of eye contact, such as feelings of aggressiveness or dominance, which hinder the building of trust in business interactions(Arndt, Khoshghadam, & Evans, 2020).

As an extension of the other facial nonverbal gestures described so far, facial expression as a whole also has an effect. Once again trustworthiness is one of the positive effects that effective use of facial expressions can create in sales meetings. When using a higher variety of facial expressions it leads buyers to perceive sellers as more trustworthy and attentive. Research indicates that there is a direct link between a higher level of variety in facial expressions and the building of trust with customers(Slepian & Carr, 2019). Using a higher variety of facial expressions based on the situation in a sales meeting complements nicely what was described in 3.1 Modern Sales on how adaptability in sales meetings was more important than simply delivering information. Additionally, it once again helps show engagement, giving the impression of active listening, by using facial expressions to react to the customer and their words and gestures.

Another important part of body language is Mimicry. Mimicry refers simply to matching the other party's nonverbal communication. Though very simple, mimicry has been noted to be very effective in many business contexts, including sales meetings. By effectively using mimicry during business interactions, sellers are able to create a sense of familiarity which assists in building rapport. Studies have shown that clients will usually have more favorable feelings towards salespeople who practice mimicry effectively. (Pink, 2017) For instance, it was found that by simply copying the mannerisms of customers sellers were able to be much more persuasive and convincing in business interactions. However similar to other types of body language techniques used in business interactions mimicry can have negative effects if used improperly. Overuse of mimicry could lead to buyers feeling and

noticing the buyer mimicking their movements making the mimicry feel less authentic and potentially insincere. This creates the opposite of the intended effect negatively impacting the buyer's perception of the seller and hindering the building of rapport. (Pink, 2017)

Another nonverbal strategy that shares similar characteristics to mimicry is using physical touch. Using physical touch was found to have a positive effect on sales interactions so long as the touch was subtle and light. This could for example mean a light touch on the arm and of the use of handshakes during the beginning and end of a meeting. Similar to mimicry effectively utilizing physical touch while avoiding the pitfall of overuse, it is possible to quickly build rapport and trust with the customer (Pink, 2017).

As explained in 3.3.1 Presentation, the customer focus can shift and be distracted by the digital screen used in virtual meetings, where it is important for the seller to recapture that attention, with recapturing eye contact being an important part of that. This absentmindedness from the customer is common in sales meetings in general, but specifically in virtual meetings there are added complications such as the distracting screen, and in terms of body language there is an added difficulty in recapturing the eye contact with the customer if, during the sales presentation, the seller is screen sharing and focusing the customer's attention on the screen rather than the seller (Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021).

Physical touch is not possible in digital meetings, which removes the potential benefits, additionally, the much less information-rich nature of digital interactions makes mimicry and other body language gestures more difficult(Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020).

Generally, body language does not come across as clearly in digital meetings as in physical face-to-face meetings. This leads sellers to resort to accentuating their movements and gestures more to achieve the same effect. As a result of this, the more passive body language that is not done consciously or deliberately becomes much more difficult for sellers to read. This is one of the ways that digital meetings are less information rich due to the difficulty of reading the customer's body language and responding to it (Kvedare & Milner Nymand, 2021).

3.4.2 Paralanguage

Paralanguage refers to vocal characteristics. This includes things such as the volume and pitch of someone's voice. It also includes the general manner in which someone speaks(Williams, Spiro, & Fine, 1990). Paralanguage can have different effects on the perception that the client has of the seller therefore affecting the outcome of the sales meeting itself. The practice of deliberately changing the tone and volume of one's voice can therefore be seen as a tool for the seller in order to achieve different results based on the desired effect. (Apple, Streeter, & Krauss, 1979).

The rate at which someone speaks is also a part of paralanguage and has an effect on how the speaker is perceived during interactions, especially in business interactions. Research has shown that sellers who are speaking more rapidly have a more positive effect on their persuasiveness compared to sellers who are speaking more slowly. Sellers who use paralanguage to speak at a more rapid rate appear more competent and confident in the eyes of customers. This form of rapid speaking

is also linked to a higher perception of trustworthiness from customers(Peterson, Cannito, & Brown, 1995).

Along with speed the frequency of speech also affects perception. Using paralanguage to deliberately manipulate the frequency of one's voice was found to influence the persuasiveness of sellers. High-pitched speakers were found to be less trustworthy than people who spoke at a lower frequency, therefore sellers who could manipulate their voice to have a lower pitch were able to use paralanguage as a tool to change the perceptions of customers. (Apple, Streeter, & Krauss, 1979).

Moreover, the variability in frequency when speaking was also found to have an effect on persuasiveness. Speakers who had more variability in their frequency when speaking were found to be more convincing than speakers who had a more static frequency. With more variety these speakers were perceived to be more dynamic and engaging, leading to customers feeling engaged in the conversation.(Burgoon, Birk, & Pfau, 1990).

This once again ties into the common theme found so far in nonverbal communication, that adaptability and variability help sellers in achieving a more positive perception. Similar to what was described about the variety of a speaker's frequency, having more variety in the volume of one's voice was also found to have a positive effect on the perception of the speaker. Speakers who spoke with more variability in the volume of their voice were found to be more persuasive than speakers who were more static (Zuckerman & Driver, 1989).

One example of using paralanguage to achieve a desired outcome is a seller speaking in a more informal way during a sales meeting. This can have the effect of changing the way the client perceives them and more specifically for them to

hopefully appear less as a stereotypical salesman and instead appear as a more friendly and approachable person. Sellers who were able to speak in this way while still remaining professional were found to be a more effective way to build rapport with customers, during sales meetings. (Kaski, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018).

As all of the characteristics of paralanguage nonverbal communication such as changing the volume of one's voice can be used to its full potential during a digital meeting mostly the same as a physical one, it stands to reason that paralanguage would be significantly less impacted by digital meetings than other nonverbal elements like body language. With that said there is one notable exception that can be observed by using the information from the previously written literature. As described earlier speakers can manipulate the volume of their voice to achieve specific effects during communication, however, the major difference between using this practice in a digital meeting as opposed to a physical meeting, is that in a digital meeting, the buyer has complete control over the volume of the device they are using to communicate, such as a smartphone or a computer. This would mean that the seller would not be able to know exactly how much volume from their voice the buyer is receiving, unlike in a physical meeting, where assuming all participants have the same general level of hearing, the speaker knows the volume the listener is hearing.

3.4.3 Proxemics

Proxemics in nonverbal communication refers to the physical distance that exists between the different communicators. It is another important component of nonverbal communication(Williams, Spiro, & Fine, 1990).

When communicating physically, individuals have the ability to choose the proximity in which they communicate. Proxemics is typically divided into several different zones. These various zones of proximity range from the most extreme ends of the spectrum with formal space being far away and intimate space being very close. Formal space is typically used in public and in non formal settings such as when the speaker is in public and speaking to an audience, it creates a sense of distance not only physically but also on an emotional and subconscious level as it creates a more professional detached stance for the speaker. Intimate space is almost always reserved for romantic partners and close friends, where there is implicit trust and understanding between the speakers. Hans, A., & Hans, E. (2015)

Physical sales interactions like sales meetings usually take place between these two different zones. This middle range is referred to as the social space, and the variability in this zone allows for both personal and professional exchange based on the context of the situation and relationship between the speakers. While Proxemics is something that is generally used subconsciously during communication, the cultural norms of the speakers are one of the main things that inform their preferred distance. (Delaney, 2022) Along with the physical distance the orientation of the speaker's body also affects the success of the communication, with speakers who had their body more open and leaned towards the other person were perceived to be more persuasive(Bonoma & Felder, 1977).

Optimal usage of proxemics varies greatly for different cultures, countries, and social groups, as there are different preferences and levels of distance that people are comfortable with or feel is appropriate(Delaney, 2022) (Hall, 1963). Additionally, people from the same culture are generally more comfortable at closer distances

compared to people from different cultures, meaning that speakers with cultural similarities will generally choose to interact closer to each other subconsciously (Willis, 1996). This can be seen as another example of shared experiences making it easier for people to quickly build trust, as was described earlier in 3.3.2.1 Small talk.

Due to the great large variance in the usage of proxemics in different areas of the world, the analysis of proxemics in this project will for the most part be focused on how Europeans perceive and use proxemics. Europeans generally feel confident with a longer distance between people who are not close. This would mean that the intimate distance is not preferred(Guerrero, 2016).

Choosing the right distance for communication can be seen as one of the first significant steps for building an interpersonal buyer and seller relationship(Roman, T., Manolica Adriana & Balan, M. 2020). In closer distances and especially intimate distances the personality of the seller along with their traits are enhanced, which can both be positive and negative, though the usage of proxemics also has a generally positive effect aside from this. Buyers will feel more comfortable and perceive the seller as more persuasive if the optimal distance is utilized during a business interaction(Hashimoto & Borders, 2005).

With digital interactions, proxemics is rather simple as there is no observable physical space between the buyer and seller. Without the ability to choose the distance, the possible positive effects that optimal usage of proxemics can provide are absent. Though at the same time, the risks involved are also absent.

One notable exception to this concerns the perceived distance during digital sales meetings geographically. While there isn't a clearly observable physical distance such as in physical meetings, people are generally less persuaded by people they

perceive to be further away geographically, with the critical distance being 30m which digital meetings will generally surpass. Beyond this distance, trust is decreased. This can be mitigated through consistent interaction over time(Bradner & Mark, 2002), but with this project's focus being on initial sales meetings, it is worth mentioning. The implication of this is that sellers must compensate for this change in other ways during digital sales meetings. This does present another area where digital meetings are less information-rich than physical ones, similar to how body language was described earlier.

3.5 The physical space

The last category of a sales meeting is the physical space of the meeting, in this project, this includes the space that the meeting takes place in, as well as any physical objects that have an effect on the meeting, such as products used for demonstration purposes or potentially refreshments used to improve the customer experience for the client.

Despite the digital transformation and the internet fundamentally changing the landscape of interaction between companies and customers, the physical space and by extension the physical experience still has relevance today. In response to interactions moving online, many companies have started focusing more on physical locations and customer experience. (Yang, Gong, Land, & Chesney, 2020)This can for example be observed with companies like Amazon which has invested in physical locations with a focus on the customer experience and taking advantage of the unique value that physical experiences can offer customers. Amazon is not the only

company engaged in this as many so-called O2O or online-to-offline companies are invested in moving customers from online to physical locations and experiences. Specifically, companies are interested in bringing the physical and digital experiences and interactions closer together. (Yang, Gong, Land, & Chesney, 2020) This is partly due to the transformation of the omni-channel interactions that are becoming the norm in company and customer interaction as described in 3.1 Modern Sales.

This is also something that is observed in the B2B world as many companies have acknowledged the advantages that the physical experience has can be used to create value. In terms of sales interactions, the physical space can be utilized to deliver information, making it possible to view the physical space as a form of nonverbal communication(Broadbent, Bunt, & Jencks, 1980). Customers will use the physical setting to inform their beliefs about the seller and the company (Zeithaml, 1988). In the context of sales meetings, customers will perceive offerings in a more positive way, simply by viewing them in a more pleasing environment.(Obermiller & Bitner, 1984)

The physical space can communicate and influence the customer via the sensory experience. Sensory experience is defined as influencing and appealing to the senses, these senses being sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. (Schmitt, 1999) Touch and sound were discussed earlier in 3.4.1 Body Language and 3.4.2 Paralanguage, sight, and smell is more closely related to the physical space of the sales meeting however.

In terms of smell, there are various ways it can influence a sales meeting. As discussed in 3.1 Modern sales, Customers are presented with information overload

in modern sales and marketing, therefore smell could help guide the customer. With the information overload leading customers to become more numb to more traditional forms of influencing, scent can help influence the customer in more subtle ways. (Berčík, Neomániová, Mravcová, & Gálová, 2021). Scents can have a variety of different effects, and can therefore be used both as a form of branding to fit the company image but also convey a specific meaning to customers(Minsky, Fahey, & Fabrigas, 2018).

As for taste, there is a lack of research done on the effects of food or snacks and their effects on customers in sales meetings despite the popularity of offering or incorporating food into meetings(Harshini, 2024).
There are ways that that food can influence people that could explain the popularity of its use. Food and taste can make people more susceptible to absorbing information, which benefits the presentation part of a sales meeting(Isen, Rosenzweig, & Young, 1991) Positive taste also makes people more susceptible to persuasion(Isen & Means, 1983; Petty, Schumann, Richman, & Strathman, 1993) Rapport building as was discussed earlier to especially be affected by sales meetings is also affected by the design of the physical setting. More pleasant surroundings lead to an easier time building rapport(Bitner, 1992).

While the use of these senses can be considered an emotional appeal as opposed to a more logical one, customers are considered both rational and emotional decision-makers. While this has been more of a focus in B2C marketing, the emotional process is still considerably important in B2B contexts(Kaufmann,

Wagner, & Carter, 2017).Though there is a lack of research on customer experience in B2B settings(De Keyser, Verleye, Lemon, Keiningham, & Klaus, 2020)

All of this correlates with what has been previously written on sales meetings being more idiosyncratic in nature, and rapport building through non-business related communication being important for building longer-lasting business relationships based on trust. There is a positive effect on purchase intention from the sensory experience(Nasermoadeli, Ling, & Maghnati, 2013). If utilized well, customers are more likely to feel inclined to make purchases.

This can be observed as yet another area where physical sales meetings are more information rich than digital meetings. With digital meetings limiting the sensory experience to just sight and sound. This gives sellers less opportunity to communicate certain ideas or feelings to customers, while also having less risk of communicating the wrong things to the customer, via the physical setting. Once again rapport building is one of the focus areas when it comes to the benefits of physical meetings.

Lastly, if the seller is meeting the customer at their company as opposed to a location chosen by the seller, it provides an opportunity for the seller to use the surroundings to gather information about the client and the company(DeCormier & Jackson, 1998). This potential opportunity could be lessened in digital meetings as there is less opportunity to observe the surroundings of the customer.

3.6 Sales meeting timeline

With the various elements that make up sales meetings defined and sorted into categories the next step of creating an overview of sales meetings involves the chronology or the timeline of a sales meeting. This will help illuminate how the different elements of the sales meeting interact with the timeline of events, in turn creating a more holistic picture of the entire meeting. In order to accomplish this the iconic seven steps of selling by Dubinsky will be utilized (Dubinsky, 1981).

According to Dubinsky, there are seven basic steps involved in the personal selling process.

The first step is locating clients and customers, this involves finding the appropriate customers and the information needed for contacting them. The second step is the preapproach, this involves the preparation and choice of approach the seller will use when contacting the customer. The third step is the approach where the seller makes contact with the customer and introductions are made. The fourth step is the sales presentation, where the seller displays the value of the product or service they are selling. The fifth step is handling objections, this step involves the seller downplaying or resolving any lingering doubts or apprehensions the customer might have. The sixth step is the close where the seller will attempt to finalize the deal and make the sale official. The seventh and last step is the follow up, where the seller will contact the customer after the sale for information on satisfaction or for a continued relationship, potentially with future sales(Dubinsky, 1981).

In this project, the steps that take place during the actual sales meeting will be the focus.

Starting with step 3 outlined in the paper known as "the approach". This step is about capturing the attention of the client and holding it. It typically only lasts a few minutes but is often critical to the rest of the meeting. This introduction sets the tone and expectations for the rest of the meeting.(Dubinsky, 1981) This part of the meeting is where the important first impressions are created as this project focuses on initial sales meetings with new customers.

Body language which was described in 3.4.1 body language plays a large part in this first impression, specifically touch as this is the part of a meeting where touch is very often used, for example, handshakes, are a common way to start meetings. Eye contact is also a significant part of the nonverbal communication in the approach(Shearer, 1992). Furthermore, informal communication and specifically small talk also plays a larger part of the approach than the other parts of the meeting. (Kaski, Timo, Niemi, & Pullins, 2018)

The fourth step referred to as the sales presentation is where much of the verbal communication of the meeting happens, as described in 3.3.1 presentation distractions are a significant challenge in successfully delivering the presentation as in the modern more interactive form of sales meeting customers are less interested in simply absorbing information especially if it's not a tailored presentation.

Step 5 which involves handling objections is more interactive and is where the term active listening is more significant. As described earlier in both 3.3 Verbal communication and 3.4 Nonverbal communication, active listening is something customers both feel is important for them to build rapport with the seller and also something that they often perceive sellers are proficient enough in utilizing.

Finally, the sixth step is referred to as the close is the last thing that happens during the sales meeting. Since the focus of this project is on the initial sales meeting with new clients, the close also refers to simply negotiating a new meeting and continuing the sales process.

This is where the rapport building and trust described in 3.3 Verbal communication and 3.4 Nonverbal communication is significant, as the rapport or lack thereof will have an effect on whether the business relationship develops.

4 Analysis

The purpose of the analysis is to compare the data from the interview to analyze the differences between online and physical meetings in more detail, analyzing how closely the literature compares to the data. As a result of this, there should be a clearer picture of how both types of meetings differ.

4.1 Verbal communication

Some of the major themes that influence the verbal communication in sales meetings discovered in the literature review can be observed in the interview. The data from the interview corroborated much of what the literature asserted, yet there are also new points raised from the interview that provide more insight into the difference between physical and digital meetings in terms of verbal communication.

4.1.1 Presentation

As was discussed in 3.3.1 Presentation, the modern nature of sales meetings has made it more difficult for sellers to ensure that they are keeping the full attention of customers during the presentation part of a meeting. This dilemma can be observed in the interview when being asked whether keeping the attention of the client is affected by digital meetings.

> Interviewer: Do you feel that keeping the attention and being aware of whether the client is attentive in that moment or not is different from physical versus online meetings?
>
> Director: Yeah, I mean, obviously, with online you can be away from the screen, as I am right now, yeah, and you can sit and flick, flick through things on your phone, do other things, and so you have that opportunity which you don't have in real life, and I think that generally it is more, it is easier to, you know, just get out of you and be distracted by other things when you, when you're doing something online, I guess. (Appendix: 1, p. 6)

Here it can be observed that both the data and literature suggests that the nature of online sales meetings is more prone to distractions in general, leading to this specific issue being more exacerbated than in physical meetings. This also seems to suggest that the effects of online meetings have a larger effect on initial meetings, as there is a greater need for information sharing and less of an innate understanding between seller and customer when interacting due to them being less familiar.

This can be further observed in the interview when discussing using demonstrations to show clients information or images during meetings.

Director: I'd say much more complicated. To be honest, I think everything is more complicated, rather than when you sit next to somebody, you can much, much easier flick through emails, open different files and all that stuff and just use your screen, project it up to a wall or whatever you need. But once you're looking at file sharing and they flick off the screen, you do that. You're also trying to look up something yourself and somebody's trying to share a screen with you. You're looking for your own files. I mean, there's just a lot of things that get lost because you're not necessarily focusing your attention on the same kind of platform.(Appendix: 1, p. 4)

Despite the prevalence of digital meetings, technical difficulties still happen along with the added difficulty of keeping the attention of the customer as well as observing whether the customer's attention is fading, due to the screen sharing. Keeping in mind what was discussed in 3.3.1 Presentation, customers were less interested in presentations and simply observing information as opposed to more interactive dialogue. Therefore the difficulty of using screen sharing for more complex meetings can be seen as a barrier to achieving better results.

As established in 3.3.1 presentation often involves a physical demonstration of some kind, making this problem more pronounced as there is an expectation from the buyer to have a visualization of the product or offering. This forces the seller to navigate the presentation aspect of digital meetings in order to meet expectations even if technical issues occur. Furthermore, this issue can be more complex as there

is no standard software used by all companies to conduct digital meetings. This issue can be observed in the interview.

> Director: Yeah, so everybody has a specific, whether it's a Google, google, google meet or Zoom or something like a WhatsApp call via video. You know there's all. There's all sorts of technologies. I mean, it used to be Skype only. (Appendix: 1, p. 3)

> Director: It's just, it's complicated. So then you find something else and then there's another problem there, and so on. It would be kind of easier if there was a just one universal platform that everybody used and that's it(Appendix: 1, p. 3)

Without a universal platform for the buyers and sellers to use in business interactions, it increases the chances that there might be technical difficulties or that more time will be spent in the beginning of the meeting to check the setup and connection. This can be seen as a more practical issue in the context of a digital sales meeting that isn't touched on as much in the literature, however, it is another way in which digital meetings can be seen as more task-oriented. With these technical difficulties reducing the amount of natural opportunities for small talk.

From the interview, it seems that physical meetings are preferred for more complicated sales in general, though it is not always a possibility for sellers to have physical meetings, even if it would be ideal.

Director: So you know, we would also do big deals with various tourist boards

and stuff like that, with various tourist boards and stuff like that and you can't

meet the head of Visit Denmark in Denmark necessarily for a meeting, even

though they're quite complicated sales yeah, so it can work, but obviously for

something like that I would say the preferable thing is to meet in an

office.(Appendix: 1, p. 2)

On a technical level, it can be argued that the more information-rich physical

meetings, make it easier to discuss more complex topics. The possible technical

difficulties that can arise when using demonstrations can also be a factor that affects

this. With the difficulties associated with demonstrations and screen sharing and the

less information-rich nature of digital meetings, it can be argued that the differences

between physical and digital sales meetings are much more pronounced in these

types of complex meetings.

4.1.2 Informal communication

As was discussed in the literature review informal communication was significantly

less prominent in digital meetings. In the interview, the interviewee responded that

online meetings had less room for small talk and informal communication.

Director: Yeah, I think that is true. I mean, if you're meeting somebody, they

come from outside the same street that you came from and you have, you

know, similar experiences about the day and stuff like that, and it just tends to.

I guess I think it's true. I think that you tend to more quickly tend to focus on the task(Appendix: 1, p. 5)

Specifically, the interviewee mentioned that the lack of similar experiences acted as a barrier for informal communication to spontaneously and naturally occur. This corroborates the literature described in 3.3.2.1 small talk about the effects that shared experiences have on communication. Without the shared experience of being in the same physical location, there is less opportunity to quickly establish a common ground. Additionally, the interviewee stated there was less of a personal connection in meetings that were online.

Director: I think it is more task focused. So if yeah if I would take a meeting in in my office, you know, somebody would come in and I would go down and shake their hand and I would say, come in and you can sit here for five minutes while, while, or if, where you want to hang your coat, you would like a cup of coffee, show them around a little bit and that's sort of you know, that's so. That's kind of almost like small talk in itself yeah, so there's less of the sort of physical interaction really. (Appendix: 1, p. 7)

The lack of natural interactions that can occur leads to less small talk during the beginning of a sales meeting. With the more task focused nature of online meetings there are also less excuses to extend the meeting in any way to account for informal interaction. This can be seen in the context of what was discussed in 3.3.2.1 Small

talk, namely that small talk was not something that could simply be utilized to achieve a positive effect without considering the context of the situation. With fewer natural opportunities for small talk due to the lack of shared experiences, attempts at small talk could come off as insincere or less authentic.

This lack of a personal connection is expanded upon further by the interviewee once again in the interview.

> Director: Really, yeah, there's less of a personal connection maybe, yeah. And then, obviously, if it's online, you know it's hello, okay, how's the weather in Paris? You know, here in London it's bad again, yeah, and you sort of try and imagine who the person is in front of you, but you do get a different kind of feel if you're actually in front of that person. (Appendix: 1, p. 7)

The theme that can be observed here is again the lack of shared experiences creating a barrier for small talk and a more personal connection. The classic example of the weather as a shared experience as was described in 3.3.2.1 Small talk can also be observed here, corroborating its usefulness as a simple form of a shared experience for informal communication. Once again without the shared experience, the attempts at small talk feel less authentic, with the seller having to make more assumptions in order to connect with the customer.

Moreover, the lack of a personal connection is a barrier to utilizing the second story as a tool for building rapport. All the potential benefits that using the second story could bring are significantly more difficult to achieve without the shared experience, though rapport building is the most prominent missed opportunity.

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4.2 Nonverbal communication

4.2.1 Body language

From the interview, it's observed that one of the most important parts of body language in sales meetings is eye contact.

> Director: You don't see the person the same way, obviously. You're only just seeing the face and shoulders. It's a different kind of transaction. I'd say that very quickly you kind of go away from looking at the person and you start looking at your screen instead(Appendix: 1, p. 3)

The type of connection seems to be different, specifically less personal. More focus on the screen rather than the person also correlates with what was established earlier about digital meetings being more task-oriented. With the gaze being directed at the screen rather than the other participant, the positive effects that effective use of contact can have are diminished. The data from the interview suggest that only being able to view the face and shoulders of the other participant, makes one subconsciously more likely to focus less on eye contact and more on the screen. This can be explained by what was described 3.4.1 Body language. Without being able to use body language to its full extent it was more difficult to keep the engagement of the buyer and therefore the attentiveness of the buyer wanes leading to diminished eye contact.

Another factor from the literature that can be observed from the interview is showing commitment to make the customer feel more valued.

> Director: And obviously, if you're talking together in the digital space only, if you're talking together in the digital space only, or you're sort of speaking to each other remote, it's more difficult to become somebody. That sort of means anything, whereas if you actually meet and you invest time together, you go for a coffee, you walk down the street together, maybe have a little chat, you know, you get to know that person on a different level. I would say, and I don't think that it's maybe it's doable, but it's not doable to the same extent if, if you, you know, just know somebody from, you know from online meetings(Appendix: 1, p. 6)

As was written in 3.4.1 Body Language, gestures were a way for sellers to show commitment and effort to customers in order to build rapport. The more task-oriented nature of digital meetings along with the limited capacity for making meaningful gestures, leads to less opportunity to build rapport with customers during digital meetings.

4.2.2 Paralanguage

In the interview, it was found that paralanguage was not affected greatly by digital meetings. Specifically, the volume of one's voice was not something that was consciously considered.

Director: I sort of just try and talk my normal voice, really at my normal kind of volume level.(Appendix: 1, p. 9)

As opposed to body language this seems to be an area where digital meetings are just as information rich as physical ones. The only issue found through the interview was with technical issues relating to sound.

I: Yeah, I think first of all you'd be surprised how many people have problems with their headsets. Strange that you would think that you know there's so much work, so many meetings that take place online and still they have like a voice that comes across really muffled or there's some problems with the connection that sort of feeds into the microphone somehow, and so there's often you have actually issues when you take, you know, online meetings, with actually hearing what people are saying.(Appendix: 1, p. 8)

From the interview, it was observed that technical difficulties with sound and microphones were common, but this can be argued to be less relevant in subsequent meetings where the participants are more familiar with each other and the technology. With this in mind, it seems that it would mostly affect the first impressions at the start of a meeting.

4.2.3 Proxemics

Closeness was found to be important in digital meetings as well.

> Director: I do, um. So I think obviously it's important that they see your face,
> um so which is with lighting and other things. You know, sometimes you have
> to move right in front of your camera kind of to kind of show your face, so, um,
> and you can also just as easily kind of distort yourself a little bit by moving
> further back(Appendix: 1, p. 9)

Instead of moving physically around the meeting room, moving closer to the camera
was the way sellers could achieve closeness with customers. Yet there is a more
limited ability to use closeness because of the camera. As mentioned in 3.4.3
proxemics the optimal distance differs from culture to culture leading to a risk of
choosing the wrong distance in physical meetings, this risk is mostly eliminated in
digital meetings.

The lack of different spaces like the intimate and social space, mirrors what is known
about the public space and the way it's more detached and less personal, also
mirrors the more task-oriented nature of digital meetings.

Also, the data from the interview correlates with what is found in the literature about
the proxemics being able to enhance the characteristics of the sellers, leading to
buyers having a more neutral less personal, and specific impression of the seller,

whereas in a physical meeting the seller has more opportunity to leave a longer lasting impression.

4.3 Physical space

The physical space is inherently different in online vs physical sales meetings, but the data gathered from the interview also suggests how this affects the meeting itself.

> Director: I think most people have the usual habits if there's a camera involved just make sure that you know you're not showing, uh, you know the dirty socks in the background and other things and you have a fairly fairly decent background, um, yeah, so, uh, close, closing the door and uh, making sure that you, you look presentable and sort of you can manipulate the lights and other things. (Appendix: 1, p. 4)

Rather than modifying the entire physical space to create a good impression, in digital meetings, it's only necessary to make the physical space visible through the camera look presentable. Though at the same time, it's more important to manipulate the lighting due to the camera not working the same as regular eye contact during a physical meeting.
The different process of preparing the physical space for a digital meeting then gets expanded upon.

Director: Um, you know, now you can also choose a background if you want yourself. Yeah, um, but in terms of the presentation, you know, now you can also choose a background if you want yourself. Yeah, but in terms of the presentation, you know, you can obviously sit in a pair of shorts and a nice shirt, you know. So it's obviously a little bit more complicated when you have to go on and meet somebody physically, and so the presentation is different. Right, if you go and meet somebody, you make sure that your shoes are polished and you have the whole uniform on if it's a formal meeting, whereas you can literally, just, you know, sit in your boxer shorts with a shirt on, if you want.(Appendix: 1, p. 4)

As can be observed from the interview, the process of using the physical space to create a good first impression is shorter and more simple yet there is also less opportunity to create a stronger longer lasting impression. As the camera only shows what the seller wishes to show, the preparation is not as time-consuming or complex as a physical meeting.

This is another area where it is more difficult to show commitment and effort. Along with the lack of most sensory dimensions it leads to a significantly less information-rich meeting.

Interviewer: Yeah, but you can't show as much no To show off how professional you are, you know.

Director No, that is true.

Interviewer: Yeah, maybe sort of a less risk, less reward scenario.

Director: Yeah, I think that's probably a good way to put it.(Appendix: 1, p. 11)

There is less risk and less preparation required but also with less opportunity to show commitment and effort to the customer, this mirrors what was analyzed in 4.2.1 body language. With the lack of most sensory dimensions and less opportunity to show commitment, the potential for rapport building is lessened.
Additionally, there is also less opportunity for the seller to gather information on the customer through their surroundings due to the limitations of the digital meeting, namely that the seller will only be viewing the customer through the camera.

4.4 Sales meeting timeline

Through the interview, there were some differences observed in the start of digital and physical meetings.
One of those differences from the interview is how common minor technical issues are during the beginning of an online sales meeting.

Director: I do think it's different. I do think it's different. I mean the technology part. You know it never works, which is kind of weird. You would have thought you know that it would work, you know, with Zoom or whatever, but there's always a microphone that gives an echo or there's always somebody who

can't hear it, or something that goes wrong. So you would have thought, after you, four years of you know being sort of used to this kind of new digital way of working, that we would be better at it. (Appendix: 1, p. 3)

This changes the initial impression of the meeting. Additionally, it helps explain the more task-oriented nature of online meetings as the beginning of the meeting is reserved for making sure the technology is working correctly as opposed to using this time to get more comfortable or discuss shared experiences as described in The end of a digital meeting was also found to be different from a physical one.

Director: You know when you can, you know, give, you know a little salute and say goodbye, and you know you go down that way that the tube's just down the road and you can walk them out and do all sorts of things that, uh, that you just can't do online. You then click the button and then that's it. So I'd say it's if you're trying to sell somebody something, you know the art of saying goodbye and hello is like an important thing in sales, you know. So you can't shake their hands, you can't look them in the eye the same way and say you know, lovely to meet. You, give them a big smile and all these little things. It's just different online. (Appendix: 1, p. 12)

Here it can be observed that there is a lack of opportunities for gestures to help build rapport in digital meetings, as the end of the meeting is achieved by logging out, as opposed to the end of a physical meeting, which is more involved. The extra time

gives more opportunity for more gestures, specifically the nonverbal gestures such as handshakes and eye contact. Additionally, the interview raises the point that the physical meeting provides the opportunity to walk out the customer or show commitment to make them feel more comfortable in other ways.

5 Discussion

Throughout the analysis of the project, the various differences between the digital and physical meetings were analyzed. The data collected from the interview corroborated many of the findings from the literature on the elements of a sales meeting and their importance. The data also provided insight on how digital meetings affected these elements. In addition, there were more differences between physical and digital meetings discovered through the interview that are worth discussing.

It was found that physical meetings were more information rich than digital ones due to the limited amount of nonverbal communication possible in digital meetings. It's therefore logical that physical meetings were preferred for meetings that were more complicated and needed more in-depth discussion. Though it wasn't only the lack of nonverbal communication that made more complex discussion difficult in digital meetings. As was analyzed in 4.1.1 Presentation distractions were another issue more prevalent in digital meetings, this in turn making complicated discussions more burdensome.

It was found through both the literature and the data that digital meetings were more task oriented than physical meetings, with less opportunity for small talk and personal discussion that wasn't relevant to the business at hand.

Though more than anything, the findings revealed that rapport building is the primary benefit of physical meetings. In the physical meetings, the verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and the physical space all led to more effective rapport building. The question then arises of what these findings mean and how they can be interpreted.

Despite all the advantages in information sharing and rapport building that physical meetings have, customers still prefer digital interactions in most scenarios.(Gavin, Harrison, Lun Plotkin, Spillecke, & Stanley, 2020) making physical meetings more niche. With customers demanding digital interaction and a quick and easy purchase journey, face to face meetings can now be seen as having a more specific goal in mind rather than simply being a type of meeting that can be used.

Therefore whether the commitment and effort needed to facilitate a physical meeting is worth it, depends on the context and goals of the meeting. If rapport building is a specific goal then a physical meeting might be advantageous.

For many companies trust and commitment is increasingly more important for building a good business relationship, making rapport building valuable if the goal is to build a relationship with the customer(Badrinarayanan & Ramachandran, 2024).

It is not always the case that a company might seek to spend resources on building a strong relationship with a customer, for example, if the interaction is only a one-time small purchase, with no expectation of repeat purchases. This makes physical

meetings more specialized in their value over digital meetings. Additionally, many of the rapport building advantages of physical meetings are amplified in initial meetings and making good impressions, leading to diminishing returns in the value of continued physical meetings after a relationship has been established.

The technical issues described by both the literature and the interview also have an effect on the rapport building and general effectiveness of the meetings, specifically the issue of screens making demonstration and keeping attention more difficult. Though the problems with screen sharing and technology in digital meetings will likely lessen over time as these meetings become even more dominant, and screens have also been observed to be used by both the seller and customer as a value-creation tool during digital meetings(Heinonen, Niemi, & Kaski, 2023), leading to the conclusion that even more complex interaction can soon be handled by digital meetings and that rapport building remains the main benefit of physical meetings.

6 Limitations and further research

The primary data for this project comes from one interview with a single company. This could influence the findings, and further research could therefore gather more data from other companies in different industries to contrast and compare. Moreover, comparing how rapport building differs in companies that use digital meetings and companies that use physical meetings could provide more valuable knowledge and diminish the research gap.

7 Conclusion

This project seeked to answer the question:

What are the major differences between digital and physical sales meetings with new clients?

The findings from using both the literature review and the primary data obtained from the interview have helped illuminate the key differences between these two types of sales meetings. One of the key findings from the project is that digital meetings are much more task oriented in nature than physical meetings with less room for small talk and personal conversation. This difference was found to be influenced significantly by the lack of shared experiences that the buyer and seller would have in digital meetings compared to physical ones. Digital meetings were found to be less adaptable and more rigid in nature leading to an increased difficulty in maintaining the attention and engagement of the buyer. Moreover, nonverbal communication was to be the most significantly altered aspect of the two types of meetings. It was found to be significantly more difficult for the buyer to read the body language of the buyer and use this as a source of information, and in turn, making digital meetings less adaptable. At the same time, the ability to consciously use body language to build an understanding and rapport with the buyer was severely reduced

in digital meetings. The lack of the physical space in digital meetings also increased this issue.

With this in mind, the primary key differences in digital and physical meetings could be condensed to the significantly diminished ability for rapport building and the added difficulty in keeping the attention and engagement of the buyer during digital meetings. Despite these shortcomings, the use of digital meetings has only continued to increase with more and more buyers preferring the faster more convenient type of meeting, leading to the issue of when it is appropriate to use the extra resources needed to conduct physical sales meetings. With the technology used for digital meetings becoming more understood and improving so that more complex types of meetings are less inconvenient, it leads to rapport building being the primary benefit. With this in mind utilizing a physical meeting over a digital meeting can be considered to be advantageous based on the goal and context of the meeting. Specifically, the extra resources required can be seen as a worthwhile investment if a longer lasting more personal business relationship is the intended goal of the meeting as rapport building is critical to the early steps of building this type of relationship.

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