

Gratitude in buyer-seller relationships

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Emotions are contagious. They are experienced by and affect the actions of both parties in buyer-seller exchanges. As a result, one emotion in particular, gratitude, elicits perceptions of an undeserved or unearned positive personal outcome as being due to the actions of someone else, the second most common positive emotion that individuals experience.

Gratitude has immense value to firms as customer gratitude is linked to increases in share of wallet, sales revenue, sales growth and customer commitment. Additionally, expressions of gratitude can be beneficial for both buyers and sellers as it creates a boost in interpersonal connection.

Previous research is relatively silent on the role of [salesperson gratitude](#) in buyer-seller relationships, focusing, instead, primarily on the benefits of [customer](#) gratitude. What is particularly unknown is whether salesperson gratitude motivates [behavior](#) that is beneficial to firms. Therefore, to fill these gaps in the sales literature, we construct and test a conceptual model centered on salesperson gratitude and study its effect in the context of buyer-seller relationships, particularly its effects on buyers (who will also be referred to as customers throughout this paper). We aim to understand how salesperson gratitude contributes to customer commitment and customer gratitude. To do so, we focus on two types of customer-directed prosocial behavior: salesperson extra-role behaviors and information sharing.

For our investigation, we define salesperson extra-role behaviors as actions that are considered favorable to customers and outside of the salesperson's role requirements. For example, salespeople may share recommendations for local restaurants or referrals to other service providers outside the scope of their role as a salesperson in order to provide additional resources to customers. We characterize salesperson information sharing as an employee disclosing knowledge related to his or her firm and position to the customer. Consistent with moral affect theory, the seminal theory in the psychology of gratitude, salesperson gratitude is characterized as a salesperson's feeling of thankfulness toward his or her customer. Similarly, customer gratitude is a customer's feeling of thankfulness toward his or her salesperson.

Our results show that salesperson gratitude impacts customer gratitude and customer commitment through the prosocial

behaviors—information sharing and extra-role behaviors—that manifest as a result of the salesperson's gratitude toward the customer. We also find a significant interaction between the length of the buyer-seller relationship and salesperson extra-role behaviors with respect to customer gratitude. This indicates that salesperson extra-role behaviors serve as a catalyst for propelling customer relationships forward and that salesperson information sharing serves as a tool to maintain the relationship over time.

Based on these findings, we recommend that salespeople become more aware of and adept at expressing gratitude by taking advantage of opportunities to foster relationships with buyers that are enhanced by expressions of gratitude. Additionally, something as simple as remembering to control facial expressions that may indicate your frustration or negativity can be very effective in managing the contagious effects of emotions. Lastly, engage in extra-role behaviors with buyers to save time and resources by accelerating relationship-building.

We conducted a dyadic investigation by surveying the salespeople and customers of a large B2B transportation logistics firm. We offered an email survey to the firm's active customers and received 258 complete responses. Following customer surveys, salespeople were surveyed about their respective responding customer. We received 117 salespeople responses. We matched salesperson and customer data, yielding 117 buyer-seller dyads. The salesperson survey measured salesperson gratitude, salesperson information sharing, seller dependence, interaction frequency, and experience. Customer surveys measured perceptions of salesperson extra-role behaviors and salesperson information sharing, customer gratitude, customer commitment to the salesperson, and relationship length.

Analysis of the direct effects reveals that salesperson gratitude has a

positive effect on salesperson extra-role behaviors and salesperson information sharing. While both of these salesperson prosocial behaviors were found to positively affect customer gratitude, results show that salesperson extra-role behaviors act as a stronger driver. We also see that customer gratitude, in turn, positively impacts customer commitment.

Further analysis offers strong evidence that customer commitment is impacted by salesperson gratitude through salesperson behavior, including information sharing and extra-role behaviors that elicits customer gratitude. However, we find that the effect of salesperson extra-role behaviors on customer gratitude decreases as relationships age. That is, salesperson extra-role behaviors show the largest positive impact early in the buyer-seller relationship. Therefore, salesperson extra-role behaviors are beneficial to both developing and established customers but these behaviors are particularly beneficial to developing relationships as these relationships lack the benefits of established longevity. The effect of salesperson information sharing on customer gratitude, however, did not vary across different relationship lengths, suggesting that information sharing is continually key to maintaining good customer relations. Collectively, the results support the conclusion that salesperson gratitude encourages salesperson prosocial behaviors, which cultivate the development of customer gratitude and commitment.

Customers who are committed to a salesperson and feel gratitude toward that salesperson engage in the relationship long term and engage in repeat purchase behaviors and referrals. This research highlights the impact of salesperson gratitude on customer gratitude and customer commitment, and, in light of this, sales professionals should thus raise their awareness of the importance of expressing gratitude. One method to do so is gratitude interventions. Gratitude interventions, whereby participants create diaries detailing what they were grateful for over a certain period, have been demonstrated to not only elicit feelings of gratitude but to also elicit other positive emotions important to sales

professionals, such as feeling attentive, determined, energetic, and joyful. Gratitude interventions have also been shown to reduce employee stress and depressive symptoms. Additionally, as a sales professional, you should foster relationships with your customers, relationships for which you can develop gratitude over time. In summary, simply providing opportunities to document, discuss, and develop gratitude in your workplace may play a critical role in realizing the benefits of salesperson gratitude as revealed by our research.

Secondly, an understanding of how your emotions impact your interactions with buyers will aid you in training and coaching others. Due to the contagious nature of emotions, the inability of salespeople to manage their emotions negatively impacts the buyer-seller relationship. It is thus important for salespeople to manage the mood and tone of their interactions with customers. As a result, you should recognize the value in training yourself and other salespeople not only in emotional intelligence related to recognizing their customer's emotions and behaving accordingly, but also in managing personal emotions. One simple but effective strategy to achieve this is to control facial expressions that may indicate frustration or negativity when dealing with any customer. Although sometimes challenging, this is a simple yet effective way to control the contagious effects of emotions.

Additionally, as more millennials enter the workplace, your ability to manage emotions will prove to be even more important. Substantial evidence shows that millennials are emotional buyers with emotions driving much of their purchase behavior. Sales professionals that are able to control the emotional tone of their buyer-seller relationships are better at managing emotional contagion with their customers and have a clear upper hand in working with this new class of buyers. Therefore, make sure to identify millennial buyers and determine strategies to aid in managing relationships with them.

Lastly, since our research provides evidence that salesperson extra-role behaviors can bridge the gap between developing and established relationships in generating customer gratitude, sales professionals who are new or have less established portfolios, should utilize salesperson extra-role behaviors early in their interpersonal relationships with buyers to generate customer gratitude and its benefits without having to wait for the relationship to mature over time. Accelerating the interpersonal [relationship](#)-building period will save time and resources while increasing both customer gratitude and customer commitment.

Conclusion

Significant research and practitioner anecdotes suggest that committed customers lead to higher sales performance. Our research shows how sales professionals can improve their relational outcomes with customers by fostering more committed and grateful customers through their own expressions of gratitude. If a salesperson's goal is to turn first time clients into repeat clients and to increase the likelihood of buyers referring you to others, gratitude and extra-role behaviors are the answer. Take control of the emotional interaction between you and your clients, take the time to express your gratitude for your clients, and take the initiative to go above and beyond for clients, especially new ones. These recommendations may seem simple, but they are powerful in taking advantage of the role gratitude plays in buyer-seller relationships.

More information: Stephanie M. Mangus et al. Gratitude in buyer-seller relationships: a dyadic investigation, *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/08853134.2017.1352447](https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2017.1352447)

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