

Sales professionals know how to look after their customers: Everything can be talked about

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Ensuring long-term and productive customer relationships is very important for the continuity of business. Interestingly, customer

relationships are always forged between people, even in the context of doing business. Especially in relationship selling, where the aim is to maintain productive and long-term customer relationships, it is extremely important to understand how customer relationships develop between people. So far, earlier studies have not been able to explain why and by which mechanism some customer relationships deepen, while others don't.

Published in *European Journal of Marketing*, a study conducted by the University of Eastern Finland researchers explores long-term business-to-business (B2B) [customer relationships](#), and how and to what end such relationships are forged in B2B [sales](#). Applying the social penetration theory, the researchers were particularly interested in how self-disclosure, and weighing the benefits and disadvantages of the customer relationship, either deepened the relationship or didn't. For the study, the researchers interviewed 47 [professionals](#) working in B2B sales.

From being business partners to being collaborative and personal partners

The study showed that long-term and productive customer relationships develop in three phases: first, business partners became collaborative partners and, ultimately, collaborative and personal partners. Sales professionals and customers disclosed things about their [personal life](#) and about their company. Both of these domains of self-disclosure deepened as the customer relationship deepened: the things disclosed initially were rather superficial, but became deeper as the relationship deepened, and included topics such as divorce, bankruptcy, [personal values](#), and future business plans.

Some sales professionals, however, felt that they did not wish to share anything about their personal life with the customer. This could have

been due to a lack of trust, a desire to maintain strict personal boundaries, or the fact that the customer did not come off as the type of person they'd want to socialize with outside work.

Deepest customer relationships increased trust and commitment to common goals

The benefits of a customer relationship in its deepest level were manifold compared to the initial phase. Trust grew deeper, communication became effortless, it was easier to decide and commit to common goals, and to manage conflicts. Sales professionals felt that they had gained benefits in the form of time savings, cost benefits, increased [self-confidence](#), and more efficient work.

More information: Jonna Pauliina Koponen et al, Development of long-term B2B customer relationships: the role of self-disclosure and relational cost/benefit evaluation, *European Journal of Marketing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1108/EJM-07-2020-0492](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-07-2020-0492)

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