

Crisis-driven Salesperson Network Formation: Case in Point- Leadership Implications for Kagome Co. Ltd. and Their Regional Marketing Strategy*

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Abstract

In 2011, “The Great East Japan Earthquake” impacted large changes within a multitude of Japanese business networks. In particular, Kagome Co. Ltd., a Japanese food manufacturer, was one firm that suffered dramatic changes within their traditional business networks. This narrative case analysis will discuss how such network changes triggered substantial business opportunities far beyond normal product development expectations and what salespersons should do after incurring such an acute reorganization. In this case, salespersons or managers like M who performed a central role in adapting said networks. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of this case.

Key words: Relationship selling, Industrial sales, social network, leadership

1. Introduction

In 2011, “The Great East Japan Earthquake” impacted the Japanese business network. Many Japanese firms suffered dramatic changes within their business network. It is thought that one of the traits of a typical Japanese business transaction is the long-term relationship, for example, the Keiretsu, especially in the Japanese automobile industry (Burt and Doyle 1993; Gilson and Roe, 1993; Laage-Hellman 1997). But these long-term relationships are dramatically changing in many industries in Japan.

Needless to say, the importance of long-term relationships is widely accepted by

marketing researchers (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Srinivasan and Moorman 2005). The term “relationship marketing” is applied to a number of different marketing activities. In sales management research, salespersons are regarded as relationship managers, playing a key role in development and management of the buyer-seller relationship (Beverland 2001; Bradford and Weitz 2011; Landry, Arnold, and Arndt 2005; Tellefsen and Eyuboglu 2002; Weitz and Bradford 1999).

In this paper, the authors introduce a case about the Japanese food manufacturer Kagome Co., Ltd (Kagome here after). This case will give insights into relationship selling studies. Kagome has strong relationships with their business partners. But these relationships are not necessarily “long-term”. The Great East Japan Earthquake forced Kagome to make major changes to their business network.

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Kagome was forced to form new relationships with new business partners instead of depending on their old long-standing relationships. Subsequently these changes caused product innovation and new opportunities.

Kagome's salespeople take an important role in managing their networks. Naturally, managing networks is one of their most important sales tasks. Salespeople play a unique role as a boundary spanner (e.g., Donnelly and Ivancevich 1975), who develop interpersonal ties with people inside and outside their firms. In recent years, a significant body of research on sales networks has been published in not only academic journals (Plouffe, Williams, and Leigh 2004; Sparks and Schenk 2006; SeEVERS, Skinner, and Kelley 2007; Palmatier 2008), but also practitioner outlets (Casciaro and Lobo 2005; Cross, Liedtka, and Weiss 2005; Üstüner and Godes 2006). Some leading marketing scholars have encouraged these studies (e.g., Achrol and Kotler 1999; Iacobucci 1996). The relationships between network and sales performance has been an important research issue. However, this kind of research is relatively rare. To begin with, it is still not clear what the network management is or what the consequences of said network will be. So, first of all, we need to do preliminary descriptive study on them.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how a firm or a salesperson manages the business network and what are the consequences of that network management. First, we will review the theoretical background briefly in the next section. Then we will introduce the case of Kagome. This paper concludes by discussing its possible leadership

implications and the directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The trend of personal selling studies has shifted from influencing buyer behavior to managing buyer-seller relationships. Needless to say, sales management studies have a long history. However, the research directly related to relationships has been recent and to a great degree preliminary in scope.

Originally, the study of personal selling started in the end of the 19th century in order to explore what kind of qualities and abilities salespersons should acquire and how they should behave. From that time, personal selling research had been focused on the salespersons themselves. There is a lot of research on the sales behavior, behavioral predisposition of salespersons, and salespersons' capabilities. The cognitive approach or the adaptive selling approach is one of a remarkable achievement of personal selling studies (Weitz et al 1986; Spiro and Weitz 1990; Marks, Vorhies, and Badovick 1996; Robinson, Marshall, Moncrief, and Laask 2002; Chankraberry, Brown, Widing, and Taylor 2004).

However, the focus of sales management is shifting from what is to be done at the business meeting to how to manage the whole relationship, which seems to coincide with mainstream marketing, that is, relationship marketing. In the relationship perspective, a salesperson is required to act as a relationship manager. The new trend of personal selling research is called relationship selling (Jolson 1997; Weitz and Bradford 1999). Paparoidamis

and Guenzi (2009) define relationship selling strategy as a strategic approach developed by a seller willing to establish long-term and mutually profitable relationships with its customers.

In the name of relationship selling, many studies have been done. For example, conflict management (Weitz and Bradford 1999; Bradford and Weitz 2005) is investigated as an inherent factor in relationship selling. Leader-member exchange is also investigated as an important factor to encourage relational behavior of salespersons (Paparoidamis and Guenzi 2009).

Adaptive selling behavior could be regarded as relationship selling behavior, because it is customer oriented. To gather information about the variety of customer needs and to alter sales behavior adapting to the needs could foster good relationships.

However, what is a good relationship? How does it work? And how do salespeople behave to build a good relationship? As a relationship manager, salespeople have to know the contents of the relationships and how to manage the relationship. Sales management research must answer these questions to help salespeople. But the answers to these questions are still not clear.

Related to these questions, a network view of inter-firm relationship could be helpful. Some researchers try to explain this relationship by network theory. Often, researchers use the notion of "strong and weak ties" (Granovetter 1973) and "structural holes" (Burt 1992) to investigate how the network structure between firms affect the relationship characteristics, such as innovativeness, power balance, and so

on. Applying findings of these studies seems beneficial for sales management studies.

But if network theory reveals to us the ideal structure of a network, the theory couldn't tell us how to build such an ideal relationship. What is needed for salespersons is research explaining a practical way to build and manage their network.

3. The Case: Kagome's Setouchi Lemon Project

Eastern Japan suffered a great earthquake on 11 March 2011, with a magnitude of 9.0. It was the most powerful known earthquake ever to have hit Japan. The earthquake triggered powerful tsunami waves that reached heights of up to 40.5 meters (133 ft.) in Miyako in Tōhoku's Iwate Prefecture, and which, in the Sendai area, travelled up to 10 km (6 mi) inland. The tsunami caused nuclear accidents, primarily the level 7 meltdowns at three reactors in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex, and the associated evacuation zones affecting hundreds of thousands of residents. The degree and extent of damage caused by the earthquake and resulting tsunami were enormous. Not only a humanitarian crisis, but the Japanese economy suffered a huge economic impact. One such result was Japan's real gross domestic product contracted 3.7% for the quarter of January to March 2011.

Kagome's business also suffered severely from the earthquake. Kagome is the largest manufacture of tomato and tomato products in Japan with a capitalization of 19,985 million Japanese Yen (143 million EUR, 1 EUR = 140 JPY) and annual sales of 180,047 million Yen

(1,289 million EUR) in FY 2011 (which ended on March 31, 2012). Kagome produces a wide range of fruit and vegetable products, beverages, microwavable meals, and pro-biotic drinks. But the Nasu factory impacted by this disaster was forced to suspend operations.

At that time, a person who we will call M hereafter was transferred to the Hiroshima branch as the manager of said branch. M was a recognized leader of Kagome's marketing department. Thus, the expectations were high he would do an excellent job as district manager. But, at the same time, he was a bit confused why he was transferred to such a small regional branch. All salespeople in the Hiroshima branch more or less harbored similar opinions. Hiroshima branch was not considered a high motivation-driven region for Kagome.

And what was worse, the earthquake robbed the content of their work. Because the Nasu factory was forced to suspend operations, Kagome's salespeople had nothing to sell. Of course, they had been continuing to visit their customers. But the only function they could execute was just gestures of apology that they couldn't supply their products. Gradually, they felt relatively useless and alternatively sought something to sell.

Meanwhile, M visited the Hiroshima prefectural government office for a traditional face-to-face greeting to announce his new posting in Hiroshima. He attempted to ask to the prefectural officials if they have anything they wanted to sell. The officials responded by saying they wanted to sell some specialties from their prefecture. For example, oysters are one of the most popular specialties from

Hiroshima. They already have a high reputation and abundant sales. But they can be sold only in winter. Hiroshima prefecture is also famous with their excellent rice called "Aki-roman". Aki-roman is especially suited for risotto products because it absorbs water far better than other rival prefecture produced rice. Officials wanted Kagome to sell them with an added value approach on this special feature of water absorbency.

Among others, the officials were eager to increase the sales of Hiroshima lemon. Hiroshima is the largest lemon-producing prefecture in Japan. But this fact is little known even inside Hiroshima Prefecture. However, nobody revealed any ideas on how to sell Hiroshima lemons.

To discuss this theme, prefectural officials and Kagome's salespersons visited a buffet style restaurant to pass some time. They purposely ate everything in the restaurant prepared with lemon. Subsequently, only then could they find out the fact that everything was intentionally lemon-flavored. Moreover, they couldn't find any flavor difference between Hiroshima lemon and imported lemon in the realm of taste. Repeatedly tasting it over and over, they discovered subtle differences in the taste. Hiroshima lemon is a little milder in sourness than imported lemons. But there is a price difference. Hiroshima lemon is twice as high as the price of imported lemons. Besides the taste issue, Hiroshima lemon is also very low in pesticides. So, we can encourage customers to eat Hiroshima lemon still with the skin on it. M was particularly interested in this point and then Kagome agreed to take on a new menu development including Hiroshima

lemon.

The menu development including lemons proceeded beyond expectations. Then Kagome staff and prefectural officials explored the possibilities on how to expand future business. In addition, M invited a Kagome manager who specialized in product development from Tokyo to visit Hiroshima. They discussed the possibilities. Unbeknownst to M, the product development manager had, at the same time, been seeking new raw material for new products. For example, there was a hit product using peach from Fukushima. Due to the earthquake and the nuclear plant's accident, however, Kagome had to give up using Fukushima peaches. The manager developed a prototype of lemon-based fruits juice, immediately. The prototype earned favorable reviews from prefectural officials. So, their plan was to further develop the said juice with high expectations.

The project developed into a grand contractual scheme named Setouchi Lemon Agreement between Hiroshima prefecture and Kagome. They closed the deal with each other based on the following 6 points.

1. Increasing brand value of Hiroshima lemon
2. PR of Setouchi brand
3. Food and nutrition education
4. Increasing consumption of Hiroshima prefectural products
5. Philanthropy
6. Things related to raise the standard of service for the people in the prefecture and to revitalize the districts.

The aim of this agreement is far beyond only selling lemon juice. Kagome launched two

lemon juices based on the agreement. Name of the juices were, however, not called "Hiroshima lemon". These are called "Setouchi lemon mix" and "refresh Setouchi lemon & white grape", instead. Setouchi (Seto in-land-sea) is a name of district which include Hiroshima prefecture. For the tourist visiting Hiroshima, Setouchi area is regarded as one area. However, in order to improve the image of Hiroshima prefecture and the entire Setouchi area seemed more important. For this purpose, Kagome choose "Setouchi" as a brand name for that purpose. Hiroshima prefecture started a tourism campaign to invite tourists to the Setouchi area. And Kagome uses a Setouchi logo mark of the campaign on their products. Kagome also supported the campaign with their total business network as a national brand manufacturer. Such a comprehensive agreement between local government and a private company is ground breaking. Moreover, the agreement caught the attention of Japanese national media.

In this way two lemon juices were launched. Sustained motivation of Kagome's salespeople to promote these two products was very high. Because these products originate from them, Kagome's salespeople felt a special sense of duty. They were fully conscious of their responsibility to sell them. They chose to promote the products aggressively before they were launched. The passion and sincerity of the salespeople were ultimately felt by their customers. Advertising was initially started at supermarkets on the initiative of the supermarket themselves before the product even launched.

When the products launched, channel

members closely cooperated with Kagome more than ever. Huge displays purposely covered whole corners of supermarkets themed spaces with the lemon juice or lemon juice landmark (e.g. Tokyo Sky Tree or the Seto Great Bridge) display made using lemon juice products. In Japanese convenience stores, it is quite rare to display more than a 100 counter assigned spaces especially for just lemon juice. As you may know, spaces within convenience stores are determined and arranged to maximize sales based on POS data. Assigning 100 faces just for one product up to now has been unimaginable under regular retail arrangements. A lot of unanticipated cooperation resulted thereby and unexpected huge promotional campaigns were made at channel level.

Thanks to these huge promotions, the two lemon juices sold 16 million packs (220 ml in each pack) in just 3 months. This amount is equivalent to 14% of Kagome's annual sales. Because these two juices were seasonal products, Kagome finished selling the juices on a limited edition basis. However after the success of the Kagome's lemon juice campaign, recognition of Hiroshima lemon was remarkably improved. A lot of new lemon related foods were developed by many companies other than Kagome. Recently, lemon related products are getting more and more popular as a Hiroshima specialty.

4. Discussion

Apparent features of this case are that everything contained was caused by unexpected accidents. The East Japan Great Earthquake, suspending of operation of the Nasu factory, a

situation that caused salespersons having nothing to sell, a situation where they were forced to visit unusual location they usually didn't visit, etc. All of these occurrences were accidents.

These accidents bring about network change. Kagome had to visit new locations other than their traditional customers, because they had nothing to sell to their usual customers due to shortages cause by these natural occurrences. Thus they had been causing new network formations between Kagome and its new partners, such as Hiroshima Prefectural government.

Within this network formation, Kagome unexpectedly received a broker position that bridged structural holes (Burt 1992). As we mentioned above, Kagome sold 16 million packs of "Setouchi lemon mix" in 3 months. Hiroshima prefecture has 58.7% share in Japanese lemon production with 5,542 tons of harvest in 2009. Kagome used 13% (740 tons) of the Hiroshima grown lemon just in these 3 months for only these two juices. This means Hiroshima prefecture had a lemon surplus. Hiroshima prefecture and lemon farmers in Hiroshima had not been able to cultivate enough demand for their harvest. Kagome played a broker role to bridge structural holes distributing surplus Hiroshima lemon to potential customers.

Second, the salesperson in the Hiroshima branch of Kagome was highly independent thus making it easier to make decisions for promotions. These events, such as network management, product development and so on were operating under the initiative of a local branch instead of headquarters. Promotion

budget and authority were largely transferred to the local branches. Salespersons in the Hiroshima branch were playing a main role in this case.

Because of this independence, “Setouchi lemon project” was a success. As we mentioned above, because these projects were started under the initiative of salespersons at the Hiroshima branch, salespersons felt highly responsible for the project and were highly motivated. Thus the passion and sincerity of the salespeople were ultimately felt by their customers. A lot of unanticipated cooperation resulted and thereby unexpectedly huge promotional campaigns were decided at the channel level. In conclusion, these results of network changes in this case are able to explain this problem from a network point of view. It could be said that strong ties and weak ties play different roles. Strong ties are important to gather cooperation or resources. On the other hand, weak ties are important to gather diverse information. A business relationship can be viewed as a network consisting of a nexus or a number of relationships including both strong and weak ties. It has a unique configuration and it results in different results.

As we mentioned in the case, Kagome formed such an ideal network unintentionally and accidentally. Burt (2001) referred to a network that has not only more non-redundant contacts beyond the prayer’s home group, i.e. weak ties, but also highly cohesive relationships inside the group is able to achieve maximum performance. They formed the new network between new partners, in this case, Hiroshima Prefecture. The new network was a sparse network with weak ties. The new network

enabled the salesperson to gather information and to find the new business opportunity. Then, their cohesive network with their existing customers, such as supermarkets and convenience stores, with their strong ties, was quite helpful for coordination purposes.

Üstüner and Godes’ (2006) claimed that each stage of the sales process requires salespersons to build and use different kinds of social networks. They acknowledged the importance of a salesperson’s skills at managing information flows and coordinating efforts to contact customers through his/her network. In the earlier stage of a sales process, sparse networks with weak ties, i.e., a wide range of connections are desirable for identifying prospects. On one hand, sparse networks enable a salesperson to gather diverse information, in contrast dense networks with strong ties, i.e. close connections with limited partners are more desirable for coordination purposes. Kagome’s salespersons fulfilled these functions of network organization unintentionally and accidentally. In this case, it was Kagome’s true key success factor for the “Setouchi Lemon Project”.

However, we should remember all of these changes are caused by an accident. In contrast, if no accident occurred, Japanese sales people are still responsible for finding new business partners. Their job sometimes demands them to go for beyond just selling their products. Normally, they seldom seek their business partners outside their existing network, such as the accidentally-found Hiroshima prefectural government. Japanese companies and their salesperson have a tendency to care much more about their existing customers versus

new clients. That means, if no accident occurred, Kagome would most likely not have formed the new network.

5. Implications

In the case of Kagome, we have formed that the change of Kagome's network is the critical point for its success. In relationship selling, the importance of longitudinal relationship is stressed. But relationships are not necessarily fixed and longitudinal. On the one hand, Kagome's existing network was good for coordination purposes, on the other hand, their new network was a good environment in which to find a new business opportunity. An existing network and a new network have different strong points. How to use these relationships strategically is the focal point for sales practitioners and a potential future theoretical development.

We also discovered that if salespersons intended to use relationships strategically they might subsequently experience some difficulties. Their cognition might be skewed by their current network. They have a tendency to seek new partners within their familiar groups.

The concept of "relationship selling" refers to how to use adaptive behavior to improve relationships. How salespersons adapt to the customer during and across sales meetings is regarded as the key to fostering good relationships between buyer and seller. But if a salesperson's cognition has such biases in choosing new partners inside their familiar network, they could fail to form an ideal network with its ensuing new business opportunities.

An initial insight may be derived based on

crisis-induced leadership implications, in particular, Kagome Ltd. M's actions: before, during and after the "The Great East Japan Earthquake." Klann (2003) defined crisis leadership, preparing for crisis, leadership during and after crisis. This author contends that there may be positive correlation between increased salesperson crisis-induced adaptation and fostering new networks outside of his/her familiar networks. For example, focusing on Sales Manager M, and his behavior after the crisis. We encourage further research on M and his crisis leadership function.

Lastly, it might be necessary to see personal selling from a network point of view. It is important to extend the concept of relationship with customers to a network including suppliers, business partners, rivals, and so forth. How to form networks and how to coordinate those networks are the key factors for successful salespersons, because they can be considered boundary spanners.

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