

Business communication and trust in business relationships from the perspective of Polish managers

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Abstract

In this paper we use behavioural approach to trust in search of its relations with communication in business-to-business relationships. We aim to describe communicational behaviours connected with processes of building and destroying trust. First we address to the literature on trust, the review is then followed by the presentation of the results of research we held among 158 sales managers of a group of Polish enterprises in order to propose some final conclusions.

Results of the research show that sales and marketing managers perceive common history of cooperation as an important factor building trust in relationships. They point out that experiences that clients have in communication with their companies are of strongest influence on clients' trust. Three components of trust (integrity, willingness and competence) showed to be important for client's trust. Especially openness and integrity manifested by everyday cooperation with client, respecting deadlines and treating the client as a partner in communications activities proved to be of a high meaning. Less important for enhancing trust were activities connected with adaptation to clients or those leading to exceed customer's expectations.

Keywords: trust, communication, business-to-business, relationships

Introduction

Trust has been a subject of interest of multiple scientific disciplines during last few decades.

Especially deep interest with this phenomenon within the field of marketing and managerial studies is attributable to the 90s of the last century, and numerable conceptual works on trust were created that time (Castaldo, Premazzi, Zerbini, 2010).

Trust is a multidisciplinary and polysemous construct and there is no agreement between the authors about its nature and meaning. Researchers tend to propose and invoke multiple definitions of trust rooted mostly in psychology, sociology, economics, management and marketing. Each of these disciplines presents a unique approach to the nature of trust and processes of its development (Blomqvist, 1997). While economists tend to view trust as calculative (Williamson, 1993) or institutionally conditioned behavior of entities (Zucker, 1986), psychologists pay attention to individual attributes of trusting parties and their cognitive processes stemming from personal traits (Rotter, 1967). Sociologists pay more attention to trust as a hallmark of interpersonal relationships that are socially embedded (Granovetter, 1985) and framed in social institutions and norms (Zucker, 1986).

This diversity of approaches brings analyses held on multiple levels: individual or group (by psychologists), group and social (by sociologists) and individual and organizational (by economists). The research on trust is thus led within two parallel traditions that perceive that phenomenon mostly as a set of acts (behaviours) or attitudes (beliefs):

- behavioural tradition in research sees trust as a result of sovereign decision (intention or activity) made under the assumption about a certain the level of risk connected with trusting the other party and concerning conscious agreement to own vulnerability to the actions of that party and ability to rely on them as partners in transaction.
- psychological approach concentrates on understanding deep intra- and interpersonal states as: expectations, emotions or beliefs connected with trusting relationships with other parties and trust is seen as an attitude. Researchers concentrate on cognitive and affective processes and analyse: motives and emotions of individuals towards others, their perceptions and attributions of traits, intentions, capabilities and personality of partners in relationships.

In this paper we use behavioural approach to trust in search of its relations with communication in business-to-business relationships. We aim to describe communicational behaviours connected with processes of building and destroying trust. First we address to the literature on trust, the

review is then followed by the presentation of the results of research we held among sales managers of a group of Polish enterprises in order to propose some final conclusions.

Trust as an interdisciplinary construct

In literature we find numerous definitions /descriptions used to explain the notion of trust in its economic and socio-psychological aspects (e.g. Sankowska (2011) identifies 18 of them). This diversity stems from the lack of agreement between researchers about working classifications of trust, which is seen as a multidimensional construct (Akroun and Akroun, 2011). In their classic works Morgan and Hunt (1994) or Kumar, Scheer and Steenkamp (1995) after the validation of own research models, abandoned their trials of one-dimensional view on trust and declared the need for holistic approach. Two-dimensional concept of trust encompasses the idea of good will (defined as positive motives, intentions and moral responsibility of transacting parties) and trustworthiness (defined as partner's integrity, knowledge and competence) (Akroun and Akroun, 2011). Authors of three-dimensional approach to trust (Sako, 1992; Clark et.al. 2010, Bachmann and Inkpen, 2011) name benevolence, integrity and competence as its main dimensions which serve as a starting point to the assessment of partner's trustworthiness (Mayer, Davies and Schoorman, 1995).

Dimensions of trust may be also seen from the point of view of the levels on which trust is built in business-to-business relationships (Łeszczyński 2014, Sulimowska-Formowicz, Chrupała-Pniak, Grabowski D. 2016, Chrupała-Pniak, Grabowski, Sulimowska-Formowicz 2017). Although we may speak of trust of individuals and organizations (Currall and Inkpen, 2002), there is a conceptual assumption that it is not the organizations themselves that trust each other but trust is rooted in attitudes and behaviours of individuals representing those organizations. It is the individual who is willing to trust another individual, a group or organization with its values, processes and offers. This willingness to trust the partner, may be shared within the organization and between partnering entities. Organizational trust is defined as the extent to which the members of one organization share collective trust towards the partnering company (Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone, 1998).

Trust on both levels is not the same, because behaviour of a single salesman does not have to, but still may affect the reputation of a company the person represents. On the other side, repeatable

interactions between members of partnering organizations may influence the process of strengthening the relationships between organizations (Blois, 1999).

The theory of trust is still in its developmental phase, which is visible in growing number of papers in leading journals in the field of managerial studies and marketing (Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012; van Zeeland-van der Holst and Henseler, 2018). Thus our aim is not to deepen the understanding the trust *per se* in its complexity; instead we concentrate our attention on one of the aspects affecting trust - the meaning of communication for trust building process.

As Huang and Wilkinson (2013) notice, most of the papers on trust show it as a determinant of relationship, but there is a lack of research on its dynamics. We know much more about the influence of trust on B2B relationships, than about the factors affecting the growth or decline of trust itself. Especially rebuilding trust is seen as a difficult and sluggish process (Schweitzer et.al., 2006), but still attempts to find a solution for trust erosion are perceived as bringing more value than ignoring the problem. In the following part of the paper we concentrate on the factors that may destroy or build trust in business-to-business relationships.

Trust and communication in business relationships

Researchers search for factors conducive to trust in business-to-business relationships in individuals, organizations or interactions between them. Communication and shared values are mentioned as important determinants of trust between companies in a vast body of literature (Dyer and Chu, 2011; Leszczyński, 2013). Meta-analysis of research results by Palmatier et al. (2007) shows that the role of communication in trust building process is stronger than of other factors. Communication is seen as “glue bonding distribution channels” (Mohr and Nevin, 1990). The research shows how trust is affected by different features of communication process: the quality of formal ways of exchanging information (Anderson and Narus, 1990), the speed and pace of information exchange (Moorman, Zaltmana and Deshpande, 1993), frequency and quality of communication (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) rather than by specific types of communication activities.

Communication is also seen as a result of trust established by partnering parties (Akrouit and Akrouit 2011). Interpersonal trust affects communication, engagement, satisfaction and long-term orientation of partnering entities (Jiang, Henneberg and Naude, 2011). Trust in partnerships comes

from cognitive and relational proximity between parties, which enhances the exchange and strengthens cooperation (Thorgren and Wincent, 2011). Trust promotes mutual understanding and convergence of partners (Gulati, 1995). Relationships based on trust are characterized by behaviors accompanying more effective information exchange (Ballantyne and Varey, 2008), stronger willingness to exchange confidential information (Akrouf and Diallo 2017) and share the knowledge (Ashnai et al. 2016). It is all happening due to the use of heuristics, which simplify the assessment of gathered information about the partner and speed up the decision-making

Although the research confirms strong correlations between communication and trust, still there is a gap visible in our knowledge about these phenomena. It is worth searching for the answers to the question about which activities within business-to-business communication contribute to building inter-partner trust and which may have a devastating impact on trusting relations.

Method

In order to find the answers to the research questions posited, qualitative and quantitative research was held. In the first phase of the research we used the data gathered from sales and marketing managers in a form of essays in which they presented communication activities that might have dominant role in trust building process. The method and results of this part the authors presented elsewhere (La Rocca et al. 2016). On the basis of that research results we made a list of activities that, according to managers, make customer see the company as trustworthy, build and maintain customer's trust and may impair customer's trust in company (Table 1.). This list was used as a basis for the questionnaire used to gather the data for quantitative part of the research.

Table 1. Aspects of trust resulting from qualitative research

Makes customer see a company as trustworthy	Builds and maintains customer's trust in a company	May impair customer's trust in a company
Positive prior experience	Communicating on-time, respecting dead-lines	Communicating misleading information

Honesty in communication	Communicating that the counterpart is treated as partner	Overpromising in communication
Communicating the willingness to solve customer's problems	Confronting the customer and solving problems together	Inadequate quality of product/service
Flexibility in solving technical and commercial problems	Adapting communication to customer needs or expectations	Hiding potential problems
High professional competence	Being honest in communicating	Delays in reacting to customer requests and questions
References & reputation	Communication aimed at development of personal relationships	Inconsistent communication by the company to the customer
Admitting mistakes	Exceeding customer's expectations	Providing incomplete commercial and technical information
		Personal and organizational changes in our company

Source: (La Rocca, Leszczyński, Snehota and Zieliński, 2016)

The aim of the research was to find out which communications activities may affect trust between parties. We used the on-line questionnaire prepared with the use of Lime Survey software. 478 sales, marketing or top managers were invited to take part in our survey, 180 of them submitted to our survey and 158 surveys were eligible for analysis (response rate: 33,1%). Most of respondents (60,1%) work in sales while the remaining part work in marketing or general management. Respondents are experienced, as they have worked on average for 5 years in the current position.

Table 2. Profile of respondents:

role of respondent	marketing 39,9%; sales 60,1%
experience of respondent	5,7 (average) 5 (median) years
type of company	service 39,2%; production 24,7%; trade 27,8%
number of employees	2938 (average) 100 (median)

Source: own research

Half of the respondents worked in companies with more than 100 employees, significant part in much bigger companies (e.g. Polish National Railways, Polish Post). Service companies accounted for over one third of respondents; the rest is divided between trade and production.

Respondents answered three questions with multi-item scales which reliability showed satisfactory (Cronbach alfa Q1 – 0,74; Q2 – 0,83; Q3 - 0,81). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data: central tendency (mean, as the distribution was normal), standard deviation, rankings and distribution (percentage of highest answers - 6 and 7 on 1-7 points scale). All statistics are presented in tables 3-5.

Results from the survey

The data obtained shows trust as a complex concept, however consisting of items of varied importance. That importance seems to be dependent on the role played by trustor and trustee in the relationship, what can be observed on the example of differences between sales and marketing people.

When it comes to interpersonal trust, past experience becomes important - positive prior experience underlies the trust in persons that represent supplier (important for 91,9% of respondents). Two other significant factors mentioned were: to be honest in communication and pro-active when solving customer problems (84,8% both).

Table 3. Q1: Based on your experience, which of the following characteristics make a customer to see you as trustworthy?

questions	N	mean	standard dev.	% of 6&7 answ.
Positive prior experience	158	6,5	0,7	91,8
Honesty in communicating	158	6,4	0,8	84,8
Communicating willingness to solve customer problems	158	6,3	0,9	84,8
Flexibility in solving technical and commercial problems	156	6,1	1,0	77,9
High professional competence	157	5,9	1,0	67,1
References & reputation	157	5,6	1,2	58,2
Admitting mistakes	158	5,6	1,1	55,1

Source: own research

Our results show that mainly keeping deadlines and treating customers, as partners should build customers' trust. These behaviours are important for almost nine out of ten respondents (mean 6,5; 6,2 respectively). 'Solving problems' and 'adaptation' – together with honesty – were evaluated as important by about 70% of respondents (mean 6,1; 6,1; 6,0 respectively). It is important to adapt to customer expectations, but for most of our respondents it is not crucial for building trust to exceed these expectations.

Table 4. Q2: To what extent are the following behaviours important for you in order to build and maintain customers' trust?

questions	N	mean	standard dev.	% of 6&7 answ.
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Communicating on time, respecting dead-lines	156	6,5	0,7	89,9
Communicating that the counterpart is treated as partner	157	6,4	0,8	86,7
Confronting the customer and solving problems together	155	6,1	0,9	76,6
Adapting communication to customer needs or expectations	155	6,1	0,9	70,9
Being honest in communicating	156	6,0	1,0	72,2
Communication aimed at development of personal relationship	156	5,4	1,5	53,2
Exceeding customer's expectations	155	5,2	1,3	41,8

Source: own research

For the trust that customers bestow in a company, misleading communication, inadequate quality and delays in reacting have been identified as the most impairing factors. Although means of those items are similar (6,4; 6,1; 6,1 out of 7), frequency distribution shows that nine out of ten respondents perceive misleading information as negative for trust; for the other two items it is lower (77,6%; 76,6%). Providing incomplete technical and commercial information or inconsistent communication of a company was evaluated as impairing by less than half of respondents. Much fewer (13.3%) agreed that personal or organizational changes have negative influence on customers' trust in the company.

Table 5. Q3: To what extent the trust that customers bestow on your company would be impaired by the following?

questions	N	mean	standard dev.	% of 6&7 answ.
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Communicating misleading information	157	6,4	1,0	88,6
Overpromising in communication	157	6,1	1,2	76,6
Inadequate quality of product/service	158	6,1	1,2	77,2
Hiding potential problems	157	5,6	1,3	58,2
Delays in reacting to customer requests and questions	156	5,4	1,2	51,3
Inconsistent communication by the company to the customer	157	5,4	1,2	47,5
Providing incomplete commercial and technical information	157	5,1	1,5	43,7
Personal and organizational changes in our company	157	3,7	1,6	13,3

Source: own research

Discussion and conclusions

Results of the research show that sales and marketing managers perceive common history of cooperation as an important factor building trust in relationships. They point out that experiences that clients have in communication with their companies are of strongest influence on clients' trust. Looking at our findings from the perspective of Poppo and colleagues (2008) and their concepts of *shadow of the past* and *shadow of the future*, we notice that unlike they suggest in our case it is *the shadow of the past* – common history and shared relational experience that prevail as trust building determinants. Our results complement the idea by adding other important trust building factor – opinions of other subjects on the market, which we call *the shadow of the others*. Reputation on the market and references from other clients are perceived as important, but managers underline that common history and everyday communication are of higher meaning for building trust in business-to-business relationships.

All three components of trust (integrity, willingness and competence) showed to be important for client's trust. Especially openness and integrity manifested by everyday cooperation with client, respecting deadlines and treating the client as a partner in communications activities proved to be of a high meaning. Less important for enhancing trust were activities connected with adaptation to clients or those leading to exceed customer's expectations. As it comes to activities potentially destroyable for trust our results show that dangers are connected with inappropriate communication (see table 3). Mistakes connected with communication activities are seen as more dangerous than inadequate quality of offer or introducing organizational or personal changes in a company.

The above observation seems to be valid based on similar results of Baumeister and colleagues (2001), who point out that it is the reduction of the negative effects of dark parties in relationships that have a greater impact on the final success of a business relationship than investing only in the development of positive relationships. From the perspective of managers responsible for relationships early recognition of communicational problems may be one of critical success factors.

This research confirms the assumptions by Morgan and Hunt (1994), who put communication together with shared values and lack of opportunistic behaviours as determinants of trust in their model. We shall remember that in order to be effective in trust building, communication should be helpful, useful, timely and connected with minimal effort of the receiver. Moorman, Zaltman and Despande (1993) found that timely Communications Leads to trust as it helps solve problems and adapt partners' perceptions and expectations to the possibilities of their fulfilment. Communication bringing the information adequate in terms of frequency and speed of access enhances consultations between parties and common decision-making (Dash, Brunning, Guin 2007). Good communication shall positively influence all aspects of relationships but to the highest extend boost trust, satisfaction and loyalty (length of relationship) (Ball, Coehlo, Machas 2004).

The results obtained shall be seen with the notion of the social characteristics of Poland as business environment. Trust researchers in Poland pay attention to generally low level of social trust in Polish society (Sztompka 2016). Distrust and distance in social relations are mostly mentioned as a national features, while trust is restricted to the closest social circles, mostly the family. This results in low levels of social capital (Sankowska, 2011, Ryciuk, 2016, Błaszczuk, Fazlagic and Skikiewicz 2017), suboptimal outcomes from business relationships (Paliszkievicz, 2013) and low

innovativeness rates (Krot and Lewicka, 2016). .

Limitations and further research

Trust is always framed within the context of a specific relationship between buyer and supplier that is why it shall be remembered that in quantitative research it is hard to provide for deeper understanding of those relation-specific contextual factors. This may mean that respondents present their perceptions on trust lacking connotations to that context, which may be seen as both positive aspect of the research (more general view, broader perspective) and its limitation (overgeneralization).

When interpreting results presented here it is worth remembering about its burdens by the national context of Poland, which may limit the possibility to generalize for other national contexts. It would be of value to repeat the research in Japan in order to find out similarities and differences in local perceptions about the influence of communication activities on trust in relationships in Poland and Japan as countries of different levels of social trust.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire

1. Based on your experience, which of the following characteristics make a customer see you as trustworthy? (Please rate on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = not at all; 7 = very important)

References & reputation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Positive prior experience	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Admitting mistakes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
High professional competence	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Communicating willingness to solve customer problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Flexibility in solving technical and commercial problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Honesty in communicating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Other							

2. To what extent are the following behaviours important for you in order to build and maintain customers' trust?

(Please rate on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 = not important and 7 = very important)

... adapting communication to customer needs or expectations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... communication on time, respecting dead-lines	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... communicating that the counterpart is treated as partner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... being honest in communicating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... communication aimed at development of personal relationship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... confronting the customer and solving problems together	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... exceeding customer's expectations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Other							

3. To what extent the trust that customers bestow on your company would be impaired by the following? ... (Please answer on a scale 1-7, where 1 = not at all, 7 = very much.)

... inadequate quality of product/service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... delays in reacting to customer requests and questions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... personal and organizational changes in our company	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... providing incomplete commercial and technical information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... overpromising in communication (promising more than we can deliver)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... communicating misleading information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

... hiding potential problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
... inconsistent communication by the company to the customer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Other							

DEMOGRAPHICS

Your position in company: sales marketing other

Experience on this position (number of years):

Industry of your company:

Number of employees:

☐ < 10 ☐ 10-24 ☐ 25-99 ☐ 100-499 ☐ 500-1000 ☐ ☐ 1001 –

Industry of your customer