

## **Sales Enablement: A Theoretical Perspective**

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Practitioners have touted sales enablement (SE) as a prominent solution to the challenges of the evolving selling environment because it helps optimize sales interactions and reduces inefficiencies related to uncoordinated activities that hinder sales productivity (Gartner 2019). Industry reports attest to the increasing importance of this phenomenon and suggest that the technology spend on SE platforms will reach \$5 billion by 2021 (Lundy 2016).

Despite the increasing embracement of this idea by practitioners, academic scholarship on this topic has been silent. While the prevalent academic literature on topics such as sales interfaces, knowledge management, resource-based view (e.g., Homburg et al. 2017; Vorhies and Morgan 2005; Yang et al. 2011) may offer foundational understanding of the building blocks of this phenomenon; theoretical development that may allow us to holistically comprehend SE is currently lacking.

Our study aims to address this scholarly gap by focusing on two areas: (a) offering a theoretically-grounded conceptualization of SE; and (b) understanding how firms translate the SE philosophy into practice.

Data for this study came from an ethnographic inquiry lasting over 36 months. Consistent with ethnographic research traditions (e.g., Bernard 1988), we employed multiple methods of data collection such as extensive fieldwork and long-term participant immersion in relevant contexts (e.g., SE society meetings and conferences). These efforts were supplemented with netnography, as well as depth interviews with over 60 SE professionals across five industries. We followed established practices in ethnographic inquiry for data analysis and assessment of the reliability and validity of our findings.

Analytical insights lead us to postulate that sales enablement is a dynamic sales capability that is grounded in a firm's ability to: (a) learn from the shortcomings in its existing sales support

processes (i.e., go-to-market process learning), (b) utilize resultant insights to create a centralized sales support infrastructure (i.e., sales support infrastructure), and (c) monitor the extent to which this infrastructure aids salespeople's efforts and improves their performance metrics (i.e., dynamic appraisal). We further explicate a process model consisting of stages such as (a) assessment of extant sales support, (b) reconfiguration of sales capital, (c) rolling out of the new sales support infrastructure, (d) securing firm-wide enablement buy-in, and (e) enablement process calibration, that must unfold within the firm so it can successfully translate the SE philosophy into everyday practice.

Our findings make two contributions to theory. First, they provide a theoretically-grounded conceptualization of SE that integrates disparate streams of literature on (a) cross-functional sales interfaces, (b) intra-firm knowledge management processes, and (c) strategic resources and capabilities into a unified thesis. Second, our explication of a process model sheds light on the key activities managers may undertake to build the pillars of cooperation and coordination while circumventing the potential pitfalls of internal competition (Hughes et al. 2012) while developing this dynamic sales capability. In doing so, findings offer a nuanced view of the critical sub-processes firms may have to manage to achieve alignment, activation, and adaptation that form the backbone of contemporary marketing excellence (Moorman and Day 2016).

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