MASTER

Decision-making in solution selling situations
the role of multi-actor expectations in the sales process

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Decision-Making in Solution Selling Situations: The Role of Multi-Actor Expectations in the Sales Process

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SUMMARY

Decision-making takes a central role in the complex solution selling process. However, little is known about decision-making practices in the solution selling process and how it relates to sales performance. The thesis addresses this research gap. Specifically, the thesis seeks to understand and explain decision-making in the solution selling process and its impact on sales outcome, by examining the role herein of the expectations of multiple actors involved in the selling process. This is done through an explorative, multiple case process study in the setting of a high-tech B2B firm in the printing industry.

Solutions are defined as offerings that combine multiple types of goods, software, services, and IP in one bundle to deliver superior value for the customer, addressing a specific customer problem or need (Foote et al., 2001; Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010; Sawhney, 2006), and each solution is highly context dependent. In the solution selling process, decisions are made under imperfect information information, but which require expectations to form the decision (March & Shapira, 1987; Miller & Grush, 1988). Notably, both customers and sales representatives develop these beliefs and likely adjust them throughout the solution selling process (Age, 2011; Johnston & Kim, 1994), thus affecting decision-making.

The thesis considers changing expectations of both the sales representatives and customer actors an important trigger to decision-making in the solution selling process. In turn, decisions influence the adjustment of these expectations (March & Shapira, 1987). The study conceives of these perceptions throughout the sales cycle as expectation positions, which reflect all beliefs an actor holds about the selling of a solution in the current solution sales cycle, which can be both negative and positive beliefs (Ahearne et al., 2010; Johnston & Kim, 1994). Notably, contrary to prior studies on sales expectations, the thesis poses that expectations are not static throughout the solution selling process, but are subjected to change over time, influencing and being influenced by decision-making in key steps of the solution selling process.

These interactions of decision-making and expectations are explored in the context of a high-tech B2B firm in the printing industry. This is based on interview data and archival documents from four cases originating from the focal firm. These cases were distinguished in their sales outcome and by the familiarity of the prospect customer, among others. Both sales representatives and customer actors were interviewed in this multiple case study. The analysis was done using a process theory approach, in order to capture the complexities of decision-making and the solution selling process in general.

The results reveal that actors form expectations regarding the sales cycle throughout this cycle. Actors can experience three types of expectations in solution selling situations: product,
process, and outcome expectations, and actors relate these expectations as positive, mixed, and negative positions. In line with prior research (Ahearne et al., 2010; DeCarlo et al., 1997; Teas & McElroy, 1986; Tuli et al., 2007) the study defines product expectation positions as the extent to which actors in the selling process believe the proposed solution in the particular sales cycle is beneficial and desirable for the customer’s business, process expectation positions as the extent to which actors believe the process of selling the solution in the sales cycle compares to their normative expectations regarding similar cycles, and outcome expectation positions as all expectations regarding the resulting success of a sales cycle.

Expectations positions can change over time, and are not necessarily static throughout the entire solution selling process. However, each type of expectation positions has different temporal stabilities. Product expectations appear most stable over time. Outcome expectations are relatively stable, but can be adjusted based on particular indicators in the selling process. Process expectations are easily adapted throughout the solution sales cycle, and are partly shaped through the actions in the current selling process and partly through the actor’s prior conceptions. As such, process expectations are adjusted in an ad hoc manner when discrepancies are experienced. Moreover, actors in the selling process can experience both positive and negative expectations regarding the sale/purchase simultaneously.

The different types of expectations have different meanings for the actors involved in the solution selling process. Sales representatives mainly make their decisions based on product and outcome expectations, both from their own expectations, and from their perceptions of the customer’s product and outcome expectations. However, for customers, process expectations are highly important to evaluate the sales cycle. For customers, the way in which the process is performed influences future product and outcome expectations, and their decision-making associated with this. That is, the way in which the process is performed is the most formative for customer expectations and their purchase decisions.

Taken together, the results contribute to existing research in several ways. First, relating sales expectations and decision-making in solution selling, the results show a more complete picture of expectations in solution selling than in prior literature, demonstrating the dynamics at play that influence decision-making and the sales outcome. Specifically, the results reveal the multidimensionality of expectations positions, how they are adjusted throughout the sales process, and how these shape its outcome. Second, the results add a process dimension to the literature on sales expectations, explaining the importance of this solution selling process for determining sales outcome. This is in contrast to the previous static literature that considers expectations of either product or outcome, neglecting process expectations.
The results have implications for practice, which mainly relate to the successful management of the solution sales cycle. The results show that sales representatives pay insufficient attention to the process in which they sell solutions. Companies should invest in training modules to increase the sales representative’s awareness of the importance of the process of selling the solution. Moreover, sales practitioners should strive to enhance the customer’s perceived commitment of the seller firm in order to influence purchase decisions favorably.
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ABSTRACT

Despite the spreading adoption of solution selling in various industries, firms employing these approaches often fail to increase their sales performance as a result of selling solutions. The selling of solutions can be a very long and complex process involving many actors of both the seller and customer firm, who engage in decision-making in the solution selling process. However, little is known about the manners in which actors in the solution selling process make these continuous decisions and how these relate to the outcome of the sales cycle. In this study, I seek to uncover links between decision-making and expectations throughout the solution selling process, and I study the impact this has on the sales outcome, drawing on in-depth case studies covering four solution sales cycles in a high-tech B2B firm. I demonstrate that an actor’s expectations in the selling process are multidimensional, have varying temporal stabilities, and that these expectations have different meanings for the different actors involved. These aspects of expectations influence decision-making in the solution selling process, and can be attributed to the success or the failure of the solution sales cycle. The findings integrate the literature on decision-making and sales expectations, and have significant implications for both theory and practice.


1 INTRODUCTION

Decision-making in solution selling situations is a very complex process. In order to sell a solution (as a combination of products and services into customized offerings; Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010), various decisions need to be made under constantly evolving conditions throughout the many activities and milestones of the selling process (Age, 2011). This decision-making concerns significant levels of uncertainty and risk, which are even amplified when new products are included in the solution (Grewal et al., 2015). Moreover, decision-making in solution selling involve multiple actors and according complexities from both the seller firm and customer firm (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). These (joint) decisions define the content of the solution offering (Hakanen & Jaakkola, 2012), determining the effectiveness of the solution (Davies, 2004; Miller et al., 2002), and influencing the customer’s purchase behavior (Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010; Tuli et al., 2007). Thus, decision-making takes a central role in the solution selling process and can be related to both the content of the selling process and its outcome (Tuli et al., 2007). This makes it essential for practitioners to successfully manage the solution selling process and the decisions that are made herein.

Extant literature describes how decision-making in uncertain and risky situations is performed, and highlights the importance of expectations in this process. In a sales context, prior studies have emphasized the role of salesperson outcome expectations (i.e. the likelihood that the outcome of a particular sales cycle will be favorable; DeCarlo et al., 1997; Johnston & Kim, 1994) on sales effort and sales performance. More recent studies consider salesperson expectations more broadly as the belief whether or not a new product will become a success on the market and have linked this to sales performance (Ahearne et al., 2010; Beuk et al., 2014), but have produced inconsistent findings. These prior avenues of research provide valuable insights into the role of expectations on performance in selling situations. However, they have considered the selling process as a given and have neglected decision-making and expectations during this process. If the selling process is complex, unfolds over time, and is influenced by decisions of involved actors from both the customer and selling firm – as is the case with solution selling (Age, 2011; Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010; Tuli et al., 2007; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011) – considering the process as a constant entity has clear limitations in identifying possible drivers of sales performance. In addition, little is known about decision-making practices and their formation throughout the solution selling process.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate how decisions are formed in the solution selling process and how these relate to the outcome of the sales cycle. The current research draws on insights of decision theory and sales expectations literature to explore the impact of
changing expectations on the solution selling process, decision-making, and resulting sales outcomes, and considers both sides of the buyer-seller dyad.

Three key contributions are made in this research through insights into four in-depth event case studies covering sales processes within a high-tech B2B selling firm. First, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first research that takes a process perspective on decision-making and expectations in complex selling situations. Although recent research in marketing and sales has adopted the notion of servitization (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and solution selling (Brady et al., 2005), still much of the research remains focused on the creation of solutions and their implementation through concepts as customization and sales performance (e.g. Fang et al., 2008; Ghosh et al., 2006) and on the transition towards becoming a seller of solutions (e.g. (Matthyssens & Vandembempt, 2008). These studies mostly have placed emphasis on the marketing of solutions. Moreover, prior studies on expectations in the salesforce have mainly employed cross-sectional approaches, measuring expectations only once in the new product launch phase, or at the end of the sales cycle. That is, despite the fact that selling solutions concerns a broad process (Tuli et al., 2007) – which includes the creation and implementation phases – the process itself and its role in the conduction of sales has stayed subservient to more outcome based measures in prior research. In this study, the formation and influence of decision-making and expectations of involved actors throughout the solution selling process are explored, hereby contributing to both managerial decision-making research and sales literature.

Second, consistent with earlier research, this study demonstrates that expectations hold a key position in determining the sales outcome of a complex selling process. However, the study finds that an actor’s expectations cannot be considered as a one-dimensional construct that is static in time. Instead, I reveal that multiple types of expectations can be distinguished, which interact with each other to create more sophisticated combinations of product, process, and outcome expectations. Moreover, expectations are not static in time but are adjusted throughout the selling process, though some expectations appear more variable than others.

Third, by studying decision-making and expectations from both sides of the buyer-seller dyad, I demonstrate that expectations have different meanings for the different actors involved, and these actors act upon these expectations in different manners. These contributions advance our understanding of complex B2B selling processes, offer new insights on possible causes for the unsatisfactory results firms face when selling solutions, and provide managers with the means to take action to improve these results.

The thesis is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature on solution selling and explicates the place of decision-making in this multi-actor process, explores expectations in
different selling contexts, and subsequently outlines why we should consider the formation and changing of expectations throughout the solution selling process as rudimentary to the success of a new product launch. Next, the research design and methodology are described, and the coding categories are elaborated on. In the following section I present the results of the study. I conclude with a discussion of the findings, describing the theoretical and managerial implications, the study’s limitations, and avenues for future research.
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Decision-making in the solution selling process

Solutions are defined as offerings that combine multiple types of goods, software, services, and IP in one bundle to deliver superior value for the customer, addressing a specific customer problem or need (Foote et al., 2001; Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010; Sawhney, 2006). Solutions are highly context dependent, as each customer problem and situation requires a personalized approach. This often means customizing products on one or several key aspects of the solution, i.e. design, assembly, delivery, operation, or pricing (Cornet et al., 2000).

The solution selling process has been described in marketing literature in many forms. Traditional views of solution selling focus on the integration of the solution “bundle” for a specific customer (e.g. Foote et al., 2001). However, customers perceive and assess the value of both the solution’s outcome, and the relational processes surrounding the solution that are constructed through many interactional activities (Tuli et al., 2007). For example, before determining which products could be beneficial as part of a solution, sales representatives must interact with customer actors in order to accurately identify the customer’s needs. Then, requirements may be discussed with the customer for verification, and with internal actors of the selling firm (e.g. implementation specialists, service employees) to match the right products to these needs. Thus, these activities 1) often concern the engagement of several involved actors who together develop knowledge relevant to the solution (Davies et al., 2007), and 2) require making decisions for advancing the sales cycle (Age, 2011).

Decision-making is grounded in risk (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; March & Shapira, 1987). Risk can be defined as “the extent to which there is uncertainty about whether potentially significant and/or disappointing outcomes of decisions will be realized” (Stikin & Pablo, 1992, p. 10). In solution selling, risk is manifested in multiple ways. For example, with increased complexity of the customer’s business or with increased complexity of the solution offering (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014), the solution provider will need to obtain more information from the customer (Bonney & Williams, 2009). However, customers do not always understand their own needs or are not able to accurately communicate them to sales representatives (Simonson, 2005). As a result, the knowledge gained may be of variable quality. Similarly, when selling new products as part of a solution, decision-making becomes even riskier, as sales representatives have not yet gained practical experience with the features and applicability of the product in the market (Atuahene-Gima 1997). Salespeople may be uncertain how to best position the product in the market or communicate the product’s value to the customer (Rackham, 1998). Thus, knowledge is less readily available when new products are involved in solution selling. These examples demonstrate that decision-making in the solution selling process is performed under imperfect
information and thus brings considerable risk and uncertainty to actors of both the seller firm and customer firm (Cornet et al., 2000).

2.2 Expectations in the sales cycle
Prior literature has emphasized the importance of expectations in decision-making (e.g. March & Shapira, 1987; Miller & Grush, 1988). Expectations influence the decision maker’s evaluation of choices, and the results that stem from it. In turn, expectations are formed based on the actor’s perception of the risks involved and prior decisions taken (March & Shapira, 1987). Decision makers consistently engage in the framing of risks in the decision process. This is done by evaluation of the likelihood of occurrence (i.e. magnitude of risk), expected magnitude of the decision outcomes, and even creating a narrowed focus on only a subset of the problem at hand, with the purpose of managing the risks rather than accept them (MacCrimmon & Wehrung, 1986; March & Shapira, 1987). Thus, expectations are a necessary condition for making decisions.

When dealing with decision-making in complex sales cycles, salespeople and customers alike manifest beliefs about the anticipated success of the sales cycle. Customer expectations may for example originate from benchmarking of solutions in the market, evaluations of benefits and costs of the solution. Salesperson expectations may originate from customer feedback or from prior experiences in the industry (Johnston & Kim, 1994), among others. The expectations a sales representative holds may influence the effort s/he expends on a particular sales cycle (Ahearne et al., 2010; Beuk et al., 2014, Fu et al., 2010), indicating that the salesperson makes decisions to allocate a certain amount of resources in the selling process. Moreover, salesperson expectations and sales effort have been suggested as a component of a salesperson’s product adoption (Atuahene-Gima, 1997; Hultink & Atuahene-Gima, 2000), which in turn is positively associated with sales performance (e.g. Brown & Peterson, 1994; Fu et al., 2008; Jaramillo & Multi, 2008). Thus, it is of importance to consider the effects of expectations on decision-making while selling solutions.

2.2.1 Conceptualizations of expectations in the sales cycle
Various studies have addressed expectations in the sales force. Some studies consider a salesperson’s expectations as the belief that exerting a certain amount of effort will result in increased sales performance (e.g. DeCarlo et al., 1997; Johnston & Kim, 1994; Teas & McElroy, 1986). These studies focus on internal and external, and (in)controllable attributional factors regarding past performance that motivate the salesperson to apply future effort. As such, this perspective considers an expectation as a behavior-based estimate of success resulting from task-related behavior.
In the context of new product selling, other scholars have touched upon expectations when selling new products. The salesperson’s expectations in this case regard the perception of the new product (Ahearne et al., 2010; Beuk et al., 2014) and subsequently the intention to sell the new product (Fu et al., 2010). Expectations that the salesperson has determined at this preliminary stage of the product life cycle will be mostly based on internal marketing of the product and their own experiences in the market (Rackham, 1998). However, when having gained experience with selling the new product, a salesperson starts to rely on this prior (positive or negative) performance and adjusts his/her expectations accordingly (Johnston & Kim, 1994). Thus, a salesperson’s expectations of a new product are not predefined; they are shaped over the course of the launch phase and are thus subject to change over time (Beuk et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, as the above explicates, most studies operationalize expectations as a variable that is constructed based on past performance, individual preferences, and organizational influences (Ahearne et al., 2010; Atuahene-Gima, 1997; Beuk et al., 2014; DeCarlo et al., 1997; Fu et al., 2010). These expectations are then further linked to objective sales performances as new product success. Although it is theorized that expectations are subjected to change according to past performance, the mostly cross-sectional research based on objective performance often measures expectations at one point in time. This suggests that the nature of expectations is considered by academics as rather static in the selling function and the selling process (Ahearne et al., 2010). However, as the individual solution selling process unfolds over time, it is likely that the interactions between selling and customer actors shape beliefs regarding e.g. the outcome of the sales process (Age, 2011; Johnston & Kim, 1994). In addition, for a new product included in the selling of a solution, it is the first time a salesperson receives market feedback of the new product. Thus, it is likely that expectations are formed or adjusted during the selling process based on the idiosyncrasies of this process.

In conclusion, in this study I consider changing expectations of both the sales representatives and customer actors an important trigger to decision-making in the solution selling process. In turn, decisions influence the adjustment of these expectations (March & Shapira, 1987). In line with both streams of sales expectations research as presented above, I conceive of these perceptions throughout the sales cycle as expectation positions, which reflect all beliefs an actor holds about the selling of a solution in the current solution sales cycle. A positive expectation position refers to a fair certainty that the solution will be sold to the particular customer. The actor places high value on the new product and assesses it as fitting and potentially profitable for both the selling organization and customer firm (Ahearne et al., 2010; Johnston & Kim, 1994). A negative expectation position refers to a high risk to sell the product and an actor’s
firm belief that the product will not be a desirable addition for the particular customer and will not be sold in the current sales cycle (Johnston & Kim, 1994). Notably, contrary to prior studies on sales expectations, I pose that expectations are not static throughout the solution selling process, but are subjected to change over time, influencing and being influenced by decision-making in key steps of the solution selling process. Therefore, these static conceptualizations of expectations, as used in most studies, seem inappropriate when seeking to understand the relationship between decision-making, expectations, and sales performance in such a complex selling process. This calls for considering these concepts from a process perspective. I now turn to the method section.
3 METHOD

For this study, exploratory and qualitative research methods were adopted in a multiple case study setting. Using in-depth case studies, the research contributes to literature by investigating how new product expectations of involved actors influence decision-making throughout the process of selling solutions (Yin, 2009). This is appropriate, because 1) this is the first research that considers new product expectations of involved actors and their influence on decision-making throughout the process of selling solutions, and 2) the solution selling process can be considered highly complex and context dependent, indicating the need to incorporate the idiosyncrasies of the particular sales cycle.

Moreover, a process theory approach (Langley, 1999) was used in favor of a variance theory approach, in order to study the hows and whys in the cases, instead of the content (what) of the process (Van Aken et al., 2007; Van de Ven, 2007); process theory is contrasted with variance theory in Figure 1. Adopting a process research approach is appropriate for several reasons. First, the solution selling process can be considered as a sequence of events that influence how the process unfolds and overall outcome of the process. Because of the uniqueness of each solution sales cycle, no general variables can be discovered that cause a certain phenomenon. This means that cross-sectional research is unsuitable for the topic of study (Mohr, 1982). Second, some studies consider expectations as rather static perceptions (e.g. Beuk et al., 2014; DeCarlo et al., 1997). However, in this study I consider that expectations can vary over the course of the selling process. As such, the existing metrics for expectation positions fall short, supporting the need for a process perspective. Third, expectation positions are individual perceptions, and thus are highly relative in nature. Therefore, a method needs to be used that can integrate the situational environment in the analysis.

![Figure 1. Variance theory and process theory contrasted (Mohr, 1982)](image-url)
3.1 Case selection
Four cases of solution selling processes were selected that were recently performed by the sales department of a high-tech B2B selling firm in the printing industry. To ensure a heterogeneous sample and avoid success bias, two cases were selected that received a successful outcome, and two cases that were unsuccessful; in other words, two cases were won and two cases were lost. Moreover, two cases focused on selling hardware products with software complementary, and in two cases the emphasis was on selling software products as a core component of the solution. In order to investigate the selling of new products as part of a solution, one case was selected as a benchmark (Case A), covering a sale of existing products. The other three cases concern the selling of one or more new software products as rudimentary to the proposed solution. Finally, because tenders are formalized (Philbin, 2008), the conduction of the tender sales process is different from regular solution selling. Therefore, tenders were excluded from the sample.

Each case covers the selling process, from initiation of a new sales cycle – whether for new or existing customers –, to problem identification, solution configuration, and up to the closing of the sale. This research examines links between expectations and decision-making, and related these interplays to sales outcome. As such, it covers short-term outcomes of the solution sales cycles, in order to abide the time constraints of the thesis project. The characteristics of the cases are depicted in Table 1.

3.2 Data collection
In total, nineteen interviews were conducted concerning the individual cases. Interviewees all had a certain expertise (e.g. account manager, product specialist) and were chosen based on their involvement in the particular case. Fifteen of these interviews were conducted in person and were recorded and transcribed. The remaining four interviews were conducted over the phone. The notes from these interviews were processed within 24 hours. Moreover, additional data was gathered in the form of 31 archival documents (e.g. e-mail correspondence, documents that represented a particular event in the process) to ensure triangulation through multiple sources and guarantee construct validity. All interviews ranged between 40-70 minutes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case A (Base Case)</th>
<th>Total sales cycle length</th>
<th>Hardware/software oriented</th>
<th>Software focus</th>
<th>Hardware focus, software complementary</th>
<th>New/existing focal product</th>
<th>Sales result</th>
<th>Existing/new customer</th>
<th>Number of events</th>
<th>Total number of interviews</th>
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<td></td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Existing</td>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>New</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case B</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td></td>
<td>Software focus, hardware complementary</td>
<td></td>
<td>New</td>
<td>Won</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case C</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>Hardware focus, software of high value to sale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New</td>
<td>Won</td>
<td>Existing</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case D</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>Software focus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New</td>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>Existing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<th>Total sales cycle length</th>
<th>Hardware/software oriented</th>
<th>Software focus</th>
<th>Hardware focus, software complementary</th>
<th>New/existing focal product</th>
<th>Sales result</th>
<th>Existing/new customer</th>
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Table 1. Overview of cases.
During the interviews, the participant was first asked to elaborate on the general procedure of the particular sales process, in order to reveal the incidents to construct the event process. Second, questions were posed regarding the specifics of these incidents, especially when these concerned a person’s perspective on the incident, an action taken or an interaction between different actors. Thus, I first tried to uncover the sequence of event occurrence in the process (Van de Ven, 2007). I asked follow-up questions to discover how these events triggered a next step in the process and how the events related to their expectations, to create insights on expectation formation and their influence on the selling outcome.

3.3 Data analysis
Coding procedures developed by Poole and Van De Ven (2000; 2004) were used for the data analysis, and can be generally described in three steps. First, the interview transcripts and notes were analyzed, supplemented with archival data (e.g. e-mail correspondence, documents that represented a particular event in the process), to create case-specific event lists of the selling process. The most important events, as perceived by the people involved in each case, were included and chronically structured.

To mitigate retrospective or individual bias, for each event data was collected from at least two sources where possible. However, because some aspects of the process were conducted individually (e.g. creating a document of the customer’s current situation), each event was placed in relation to the previous and next event, and was proposed to the people involved with any of these three events to determine its significance in the process. Key decisions were identified based on the events. The first interview was coded by two researchers and extensively discussed until consensus was reached, after which I continued coding the remaining interviews using QSR NVivo 10 software to establish a chain of evidence across the data, extracted events, and expectations (Yin, 2009).

Second, to investigate how expectation positions evolve and influence the selling process, I analyzed all responses concerning each event for expectation positions for each involved actor of Case C. The results were discussed with a second researcher, resulting in three types of expectation positions (i.e. product, process, and outcome), and two levels of expectation positions (i.e. high and low). Next, I continued coding the remaining interviews by use of Microsoft Office Excel 2007 for easier sequential structuring of the expectation positions, after which I refined the levels of expectation positions in consultation with the second researcher. Thus, these categories of expectation positions emerged from the interview data, and are presented in Table 2.
Next, a third round of coding was performed upon examining graphical depictions of the processes, focusing on the linkage between decision-making and expectation positions. I performed axial coding, using the four process diagrams as guideline, and sought for themes and links to explain how expectations and decision-making throughout the solution selling process influence the outcome of the sales cycle. Both direct and indirect patterns were found for the relationship of expectations and decision-making with sales outcome.

3.4 Categories of analysis

3.4.1 Key decisions

Each event in the solution selling processes concerns decision-making of some kind. Some of these decision-making events were identified as more important than others by both interview respondents and through analysis, for example when the decision made determined a significant advancement in the selling process. A graphical overview was created of the complete sales cycles, presented through events and their related key decisions and expectation positions in Figures 2-5, in order to discover patterns in expectation positions and decision-making throughout the sales cycle. Descriptive tables of the decisions and expectation positions per case can be found in Appendix A-D.

3.4.2 Expectation positions

Three types of expectation positions were identified: product, process, and outcome. Each of these types was divided into three positions: positive, negative, and mixed. Thus, the analysis as described above ultimately resulted in nine expectation positions at the time of an event in the selling process. Each of the three types of expectation positions is related to literature and is described below, and the final coding scheme with illustrative quotes is presented in Table 2.

**Product expectation positions**

These are all expectations regarding the product itself, including the perceived performance of the product, the need in the market for the product, and the applicability of the product for the particular customer problem (i.e. fit of the product). Ahearne et al. (2010) defined salesperson product perceptions in the pharmacy industry as: “the extent to which the sales person believe the new product is beneficial and desirable to both physicians and consumers relative to existing competitors’ products” (p. 765). Accordingly, this study considers product expectation positions as the extent to which actors in the selling process believe the proposed solution in the particular sales cycle is beneficial and desirable to the customer’s business.

**Process expectation positions**

These are all expectations regarding the selling process, including the manner in which the sales cycle is performed both internally and externally, the appropriateness of the events in the cycle,
and the way in which the customer seems positioned in and committed to the process and selling organization. Tuli et al. (2007) have described solution selling as “a set of customer-supplier relational processes” (p. 2), and suggest the importance of the process in determining the solution’s effectiveness. Although this does not explicitly consider the expectations of the process, this study extends the given definition, in accordance with the presented definition of product expectation positions. As such, process expectation positions are defined as the extent to which actors in the selling process believe the process of selling the solution in the particular sales cycle compares to their normative expectations regarding similar sales cycles.

**Outcome expectation positions**

In attribution-expectancy theory, expectancies reflect the belief that applying a certain amount of effort will result in increased performance (DeCarlo et al., 1997; Teas & McElroy, 1986). While a good indicator of sales outcome, sales effort is seen in this study as one component that should result in outcome expectations, but observations indicate that more aspects of outcome expectations should be considered. Therefore, the current research considers outcome expectation positions as all expectations regarding the resulting success of product sale, including the perceived capability of the selling organization to effectively sell and implement the product, the perceived capability of the customer to successfully use the product once it is installed, and both financial and effort-related return on investment (ROI).
Table 2. The expectation positions identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation position</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive</strong>                                                                                                           Then you go there and look at the machine, keeping in mind the revenue model, and then you get surprised by the technology, because there is no better black-and-white printer than the [focal product]. (customer Case C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mixed</strong>                                                                                                               In the beginning I had a rather passive role, because I doubted [the product]. I was proactive towards sales, but with conservatism whether the product would be good here. I communicated that by conveying my doubts and discussing it. Then a compromise arises and that continues to be the new truth. And that happens all the time. (solution consultant 2 Case B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Negative</strong>                                                                                                            Actually, [focal product] is a combination of [competitor product] and [existing seller product]. I listened mainly from a skeptical perspective from my negative experiences with [existing seller product], because that should have been a high yield for [customer site]. (customer decision maker Case D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive</strong>                                                                                                           Then you ask afterwards whether it was in line with their expectations. And it all was. Especially [focal products], these they found really nice. (account manager Case A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mixed</strong>                                                                                                               So I try to let happen what I think is good in the process. From [solution consultant] or [customer] I do that, also to make sure that the process keeps unfolding and that a solution is developed. Because otherwise it takes way too long. (product specialist Case D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Negative</strong>                                                                                                            And then I had a problem of course, because it was one of the first sales cycles that we ran and so I had to sell it here internally as well. And then it became annoying, because no one dared to commit to it ... So I experienced that part as very annoying (solution consultant 1 Case B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive</strong>                                                                                                           It was relatively easy to sell [additional product], because of that product we already had everything. We could nicely demonstrate it; we have a lot of knowledge of the product. (account manager Case B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mixed</strong>                                                                                                               But then you have software, and they question whether or not they can recoup the costs. Still it can be [sold], but then there has to be a solid business case for it. (account manager Case A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Negative</strong>                                                                                                            I did approach a local party in the Netherlands to figure out what is sold in the market. I rather liked to continue with that. And so I thought that we would do better not to purchase [focal product]. (customer decision maker Case D)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2. Expectation positions and key decisions throughout the sales cycle of Case A.
Figure 3. Expectation positions and key decisions throughout the sales cycle of Case B.

**Expectation Positions Events Case B**
(Successful Sales Outcome)

- Product Specialist
- Marketing Specialist
- Solution Consultant 2
- Solution Consultant 1
- Account Manager

Legend:
- Orange circles: Product Expectations
- Blue circles: Process Expectations
- Green circles: Outcome Expectations
- Gray circles: Positive Expectations
- Mixed Expectations
- White circles: Negative Expectations
- Red squares: Key decisions
Figure 4. Expectation positions and key decisions throughout the sales cycle of Case C.
Figure 5. Expectation positions and key decisions throughout the sales cycle of Case D.

Expectation Positions Events Case D
(Unsuccessful Sales outcome)

- Customer field manager
- Customer Decision Maker
- Product Specialist
- Solution Consultant
- Account Manager

- Product Expectations
- Process Expectations
- Outcome Expectations
- Positive Expectations
- Mixed Expectations
- Negative Expectations

Key decisions
4 FINDINGS

In this chapter the case descriptions are presented, after which I discuss the key findings on the nature of expectation positions and their influence on decision-making and sales outcome.

4.1 Case descriptions

Case A. In October 2015, two franchised subsidiaries of a multinational copyshop party were planning to merge their production facilities, one of which needed new printing equipment. The sales department was notified of this through informal channels, and contact was initiated. The needs of the customer were identified, and it was posed internally to create superior value through the inclusion of a software product in the solution. Although perceived by the customer as a high quality and suitable software product, the customer had difficulties placing a concrete value on the product that would justify the purchase. After a demonstration of the hardware equipment and software, the customer was very interested in purchase of the solution. However, price was an important criterion. After the quotation was delivered, it was conveyed to the account manager that the value of the software product was still unclear and that the customer organization did not have an explicit need for the product. As such, the solution including the software product was rejected and the deal was not made. However, there would still be a chance to close the deal with (parts of) the hardware solution. But for the software product the sale was ended, resulting in an unsuccessful sales cycle of four months. This case is the benchmark case, including only existing products as part of the proposed solution.

Case B. The customer in this case is a relatively small player in the printing industry. Due to changed national legislation, the former non-profit firm – employing people with limited cognitive or physical capabilities – had to become profitable. In addition, the company changed owners. While the original organization had already previously sourced products from the seller firm, the new owners did not have any experience with the printers or software. In April 2015, the initiation for the sales process came from both the customer and seller side; while the customer organization contacted the seller firm looking for ways to increase profitability, the seller’s sales employees actively searched for a business case to sell and implement a new-to-launch product. As a result, the customer was placed in a pilot program for the new product, called “Controlled Introduction” (CI). Although the new product was not yet officially launched, presentations and demonstrations of the product were already given during the selling process. Product knowledge was limited within the seller organization. As a result, several employees of the seller were involved, and significant time was spent discovering the value of the product and solution and the applicability for the customer. The customer had no prior experience with digitization of a business, and was very trusting of the seller organization, believing that the seller would be most knowledgeable which products should best fit their needs. This was
amplified by the account manager, who placed emphasis on the probability of customer retention because of digitization of the customer’s processes. However, the late disclosure of a required customer-financed hardware component crucial to the software solution plummeted trust of the customer. Nevertheless, the customer had already cognitively committed to the software solution and ultimately signed the deal. The complete selling process up till signing took six months.

Case C. The customer in this case is a medium-sized pressroom, using equipment of the seller firm since 2002. The sale of this case was initiated in 2013 and was triggered by increasing printing volumes in the period prior. The account manager prepared a business case delineating the value of purchasing new equipment, combining these into a solution in combination with a new software product. The customer engaged in extensive research to identify the best offering and was impressed by the product quality of the hardware equipment, and prior experience with a similar interface to the new software product made it likely that the deal would go to the seller firm. Multiple tests were performed in the showroom of the seller firm, illustrating the customer’s primary criterion for purchase; product quality. The customer of the customer was consulted, who agreed on the quality and encouraged the customer to purchase the solution. After some negotiation, the sale was made approximately twelve months after initiation.

Case D. The solution to be developed in this case was for a sister company of the seller firm. The case was initiated in March 2015 by product specialist with good contacts at the customer firm. The customer already had ample experience with both hardware and software products. However, these prior experiences were not very positive, resulting in skepticism towards the new software product proposed in the solution. This new product was not yet released, and the first interactions in the selling process concerned a presentation about the product, after which the case was discussed internally for fit. Effective communication regarding the product and the solution proved difficult, as product knowledge was limited at the time. Although a needs analysis visit was experienced by both internal and customer actors as positive, a subsequent presentation significantly misaligned the interests of the seller organization and customer. Where the seller wanted to focus on placing a standard implementation at the customer site as part of a Controlled Introduction (CI), the customer expected a comprehensive solution. After this presentation, the seller organization collected more information about the new product and started developing a solution offer. The customer proactively engaged with the seller actors to concretize the solution, but found that internal actors were reluctant to provide information. Simultaneously, the seller actors perceived the customer wanted guarantees regarding the product and outcome (i.e. precisely defined production capabilities) that they found were impossible to promise because the specifics of the product were not yet released. Eventually,
the customer felt disappointed for having repeatedly asked for a quotation and ended the sales cycle, resulting in a total process of six months.

4.2 Relating expectation positions and decision-making
When examining the expectation positions and decisions of each case and across cases, as depicted in the process event diagrams of Figures 2-5, several observations can be made. In particular, expectations regarding the sales cycle are not necessarily static throughout the entire process, but can change over time.

As can be seen from the process event diagrams, in each of the cases expectations are addressed in multiple steps in the sales cycle, and are generally adjusted several times throughout the process. The data suggest that an actor’s expectations are shaped by key decisions in the selling process, as can be observed from the event diagrams. Through the evaluation of choices the actor appoints certain probabilities to the choices. These probabilities persist for some time after the decision-making point. For example, the solution consultant in Case D decided to continue constructing a business case (event 10, see Figure 5), and in the following events he evaluated the likelihood of purchase as rather high, despite prior customer feedback indicating the lack of fit of the solution. A similar pattern is observable in Case B. After the product specialist decided the customer would not be a good fit for the new product (event 11, see Figure 3), he upheld this view in the upcoming events (12 and 15). Thus, actor’s in the solution selling process exhibit a certain path dependency in expectations resulting from their own decisions.

Path dependency in expectations for an actor can also occur when others make decisions in the selling process, although in a different manner. When others make decisions in the selling process, actors interpret the decisions and value them according to their own point of reference. In the successful cases B and C, the customers were positively surprised by the attention the account manager paid to their business and their needs. In both these cases, decisions in the beginning of the sales cycle impacted the positive trend of expectations, and customers verified that the actions resulting from these decisions positively impacted their decision to purchase the proposed solution. Specifically, the customers noted in interviews that these key decisions built trust in the sales representative in both cases, and that the customer from there on placed the seller firm in higher regard. For example, the account manager’s decision in Case C (event 2, see Figure 4) to present the customer with a detailed analysis of trends and the usage of their current solution triggered positive expectations for both the customer and account manager. The customer experienced this initiative as particularly helpful, which set the trend for their predominantly positive expectations.
With regard to the unsuccessful cases, a similar pattern can be observed. An actor’s decisions that are perceived by others as insufficient or undesirable affect the expectations they hold about the sale. In particular, these decisions and resulting expectations often hinder the positive advancement of the sales cycle. That is, a negative discrepancy in expectations in a particular event, compared to previous events, affects the decision made at that particular point in time in such a way that the likelihood of a successful sale decreases as indicated in subsequent events. Ultimately, this led to unsuccessful sales outcomes in both cases. For example, when presented with the proposed solution, the customer in Case A questioned the fit of the solution, but found the answer provided by the account manager insufficient, thus lowering expectations. This resulted in the preliminary decision that they would not purchase the complete solution. In a subsequent event, the account manager questioned the outcome of the sales cycle. Based on this he then decided not to include an aspect in the new proposal that was important to the customer. Instead, he decided not to make an ROI calculation as part of the proposal. In turn, this resulted in negative process expectations for the customer. The customer regarded this step as an insufficiently performed task in the selling process and considered it detrimental to the sales outcome, resulting in a lost sale.

4.3 Expectation positions, temporal stability, and multidimensionality
The process event diagrams reveal that expectations in a particular step in the process can be divided into three types. In addition to identifying product, process, and outcome expectation positions, I observe that each type has different temporal stabilities, and that these types of expectation positions can occur simultaneously, indicating their multidimensional nature. These results are outlined below.

4.3.1 Temporal stabilities of expectation positions
*Product expectations.* Product expectations remain relatively stable over time, as also illustrated by the event diagrams. All actors appear to have a certain predefined expectation regarding the focal product of the solution, which generally seems to prevail over the course of the sales cycle. However, not always do product expectations already come forward in the beginning of the process. Rather, the quality and fit of the product are considered for the first time when the focal product first is considered as part of the solution. In most cases, acquisition and analysis of customer problems and needs preceded the introduction of expectations regarding the focal product. For example, the focal product of Case B was first introduced in the selling process at event 4. At this point the pre-sales Consultant had identified the most pressing needs of the customer based on preliminary information from the account manager:

I just had a demo of [focal product] and I thought that there would be a good fit with [focal product] and the customer’s organization that for which a solution should be established. We went there [to the customer...}
site] together and talked about the whole story again and I think: “what could we do to help?” But with these conversations I immediately had an inclination that this [focal product] could be it.

As this was the first step in which he was involved in the sales cycle, the pre-sales consultant had not yet actively formed an opinion about the process and outcome of the cycle. Yet, while he experienced discomfort regarding the process and outcome only a shortly afterwards, the product expectations of the pre-sales consultant did not change over the course of the sales cycle.

In the case of the existing focal product, Case A, the account manager perceived the solution as superior to competitor solutions and fitting for the customer throughout the selling process, even though the customer had repeatedly voiced the concern that the proposed solution would not satisfy all needs, and would cover others that were not experienced as a problem. Conversely, the sales cycle of Case D was initiated based on the introduction to the market of the focal product. A solution consultant with well-developed knowledge about the new product introduced the customer and seller to set up an introductory project for product implementation. The customer had prior experience with the seller firm, and had a skeptical outlook of the new product. At this point in time the new product was not yet launched, and an introductory presentation where only the general value of the product could be presented could not rectify the low product expectations of the customer, as explained by the product specialist:

The product manager generally knew what the product would do. But [customer] went quickly in depth and wanted to know a lot about the technology, if coupling with other products would be possible, how planning of the implementation would go, and some more things. What went wrong there is that one person wanted to generally explain the main vantage point of the product, while the other wanted to talk about the content of the product. And that didn’t match, because the content was not yet available at that moment ... Afterwards I got from both men the feedback that it didn’t meet expectations. Especially [customer] voiced that the product would probably not be beneficial for the [customer site], and although he tried to stay open, there were too many discrepancies in the product with his expectations all the way to the end.

However, although product expectations stayed rather stable over time, the data suggest a general tendency to assess the new product less favorably towards the end of the selling process, consistent with prior findings on expectations with regard to new product selling (Beuk et al., 2014). As the account manager of Case D explained:

But then... Every time there is again a bug and then another release is needed, and then they say: ‘oh, we didn’t think about that’. I feel that it is always so convulsively getting to the market with them [products]. I don’t know if that makes sense for software, but I experience that for sales as not very pleasant. Then I need to explain this away to the customer. When you are there on a sales call, but also when they are already using the solution.
Notably, the benchmark case concerning an existing focal product (Case A) does not show this pattern (see Figure 2).

*Outcome expectations.* Whereas the quality and fit of the solution to the particular customer (i.e. product expectations) is seen as relatively stable from beginning to end of the sales cycle, outcome expectations show other temporal patterns. For example, with regard to outcome expectations, the account manager of Case B was convinced that the particular customer would purchase the solution almost as soon as it was offered. However, the quotation involved unexpected additional costs, which surprised the customer negatively. As a result, over the course of only three events, outcome expectations of the account manager of Case B went from positive, via mixed, to negative. After this, the conflict was resolved, and the account manager’s outcome expectations became positive once more. The example illustrates that outcome expectations can be adjusted based on particular indicators (e.g. customer feedback) in the selling process.

*Process expectations.* A similar, but more ad hoc pattern can be found for process expectation positions. Each significant event in the sales cycle is evaluated on its appropriateness in the particular process. These evaluations are often based on comparisons with other sales cycles, provided that the particular actor has prior experience with a similar selling process. For example, the solution consultant of Case D reflected on a particular presentation during the selling process as inappropriate at the current time, explicating that the content in that step should have been presented at a later time:

> The analysis of the customer’s problems should be way before a presentation like that. I pushed for that analysis of the problems, because I heard there would be a meeting that afternoon and I was expected to come. It would be about [customer firm], but I don’t know anything about that customer! ... So I was supposed to form an opinion about the fit of the product by that afternoon for the presentation ... A demonstration of a movie [of the product] is something totally different than indicating what the problems are for a customer and what the direction of the solution could be. That has nothing to do with each other. This meeting should have been later in the process, because then you get a very different discussion. Then you are focused on one problem instead of on the product.

The account manager of Case B noted a similar non-cohesiveness in the process:

> You are with the customer literally in a room with 30 others [during the presentation]. And actually it is one-way traffic. So something is demonstrated, presented, actually. Yes, then the customer receives a lot of information and can really not react the way he would do if you were face-to-face, because then you can ask questions ... So that was a situation that is a little bit weird, which usually does not happen. Usually you analyze at the customer site. And from that analysis comes an advice. I discuss that with the pre-sales consultant if it is feasible. Then afterwards may come a product presentation. And that makes much more sense to do it like that.
Not only representatives of the seller firm judge the current process against other sales cycles. The customer actor of Case C already had a long standing relationship with the seller firm, and compared a step in the current selling process to prior cycles:

With [product] we always discussed in the preparatory sales process that we, as customer, would test [the product] because we want to be innovative. If a customer wants something, we will always test it. [In] the preparation towards that machine that was always allowed. Actually, we always have had it that way when looking to buy from [seller firm].

These examples illustrate that the individual steps in the process are compared to the actor’s prior experiences of similar sales cycles, but also reflect on the current action in the sequence of events of the particular selling process. Hence, process expectations are partly shaped through the actions in the current selling process and partly on the actor’s prior conceptions, and are adjusted in an ad hoc manner when discrepancies are experienced.

4.3.2 Multidimensional expectation positions

The analysis reveals three types of expectation positions, i.e. product-, process-, and outcome-related expectations, and shows that actors in the selling process can experience both positive and negative expectations regarding the sale/purchase simultaneously. Figures 2-5 highlight simultaneous concurrences of high and low expectations in the sales cycle, identifying that actors involved in the selling process can perceive both high and low expectations regarding the particular sales cycle at the same time. This is illustrated by event 7 in Case B. In this step of the process, the Pre-sales Consultant was surprised that selling the new product would not be as easy as he had expected, especially because of the perceived fit of the product for the customer, due to reasons internal to the seller firm:

What really disappointed me, and in particular during the first and second conversation, was that I had to really sell the product package ... “It’s not yet in the system” and “get back in your cage”, I got that feeling. That really surprised me. You have a new product. You want a new customer for it. This is a perfect fit for it. So I had to sell it to the Product Manager, and then I had to sell it to the responsible Consultant again, [Product Specialist] was not really enthusiastic. I got the feeling that it was cold feet ... So I experienced that part as very annoying and on top of that it cost me a lot of effort ... So I involved my manager in it to see if we could smooth out the project.

In Case D, a similar pattern can be observed in event 10, as explicated by the responsible solution consultant:

That step in the process made everything foggy again and that is difficult. ... I have never understood why there were so many people there [at the meeting] ... [A marketing specialist] was supposed to indicate whether it was a customer that we would go for. And we concluded that [customer] is a model customer. Because they already had [seller firm] products. And so we already made the scope [of the project] reasonably small at this point, shape it for a standard customer ... We continued to convert the need analysis into a functional design and we showed that to him [customer].
In this example, low expectations regarding the process because of the misplaced presentation and perceived fit of the focal product for the customer and seller firm jointly determined the expectations the solution consultant held. Even though the step in the process was rather bothersome and was not considered positive, apparently actors in the seller firm felt confident enough about the fit that they continued the selling process.

In sum, these results show that expectations are by no means static, but vary over the course of the selling process. Actors in the selling process experience expectation positions based on compartmentalized aspects of the sales cycle (i.e. product, process, and outcome). These expectation positions are manifested in diverse ways. Furthermore, expectation positions are multidimensional constructs; the results demonstrate that actors in the selling process can perceive different levels of expectations at the same time.

4.4 Interrelated and actor specific expectation positions in decision-making
The above examples also highlight that not only individual perceptions play a role in determining expectation positions, but interactions and interrelated effects can occur between the different types of expectations. Findings indicate that while the selling process unfolds based on interactions in the process, the sales representative adapts to this process in an ad hoc manner. At the same time, invariable of these adaptations, sales representatives relate the current process to similar processes and adjust their product and outcome expectations based on their “benchmark” process, rather than the current process. That is, for sales representatives, process expectations appear to be perceived as distinctly separate from product and outcome expectations. Sales representatives mainly make their decisions in the selling process based on product and outcome expectations, both from their own expectations, and from their perceptions of the customer’s product and outcome expectations.

Moreover, the examples illustrate that outcome expectations are influenced by acute actor related events in the selling process. In the above cases, actor feedback triggered a change in expectation position for the outcome of the sales cycle, but left no mark on the expectation position regarding the product. The same pattern is also reflected in the following example.

About halfway in the sales cycle of Case A (i.e. event 11), the customer’s needs were expressed more clearly. The customer requested a component as part of the solution that the seller could not provide. Together with additional features of a competitor product and the anticipated price for the software product, this made the customer explicitly communicate the parts in which the offered solution lacked in comparison with a competitor. This lowered the outcome expectations of the account manager. Although he tried to control the situation by putting in perspective the additional feature, he experienced less confidence in the outcome of the sales
cycle from this point onwards, but still evaluated the product as well fitting for the customer’s needs.

From the perspective of actors in the selling firm, process expectations appear to have limited implications for other aspects of the sales cycle. However, for customers this is not the case. Drawing from our previous example of Case D, the customer regarded the selling process as very unpleasant and rigid. He felt there was inadequate follow-up on his inquiries throughout the process, and ultimately decided upon ending the sales cycle because of the way the process was performed:

My final notice that we would not continue at that moment was based on disappointment. Because I had at that time asked for a cost indication or a quotation of how the trajectory would be further on. To get insight into the risks and efforts, and so also the resources we would need to implement the solution. And for that I have, if I remember correctly, not or barely received any feedback. Hence I thought: “if this is already so rigid – and I had received feedback from my own people about the order flow – why would I continue [with the purchase]?”

The customer further noted:

That also had as result that I did not believe that at this time [selling firm] would be able to smoothly and successfully implement the solution.

Conversely, the customers of Case A and Case C evaluated the selling process as flexible and well adapted to them, and related the process to the likelihood of purchase from the seller firm. Specifically, both customers felt that sales representatives went to considerable effort to make the selling process as pleasurable as possible for them. In Case A this was illustrated by the willingness of the customer to consider the seller firm as a favorable supplier. Note that the customer in Case A was positively surprised by the inclusion of the software product in the initial offering, but later confirmed the product was too expensive for them. However, the customer still regarded the selling firm and their products as highly competitive with their offer, despite the fact that their needs were not completely met by the offer. This suggests that for the customer a high likelihood of purchase is identified in terms of the seller firm; this does not necessarily mean that the customer will purchase the proposed solution in that exact offering. In fact, the customer’s expectations regarding the fit of the product in her business decreased and stayed mixed for the remainder of the cycle (i.e. product expectations). However, it still ensured that the customer was more inclined to purchase from the seller firm instead of from a competitor.

As the customer of Case C noted:

As befits a good salesman, [Account Manager] connects you to the right people at [seller firm], so you know where to ask questions … Especially in the case of the [focal product], [Account Manager] had done his
homework. When he first came to us he already presented the revenue model for our future. That is very valuable. In this instance sat [Account Manager] with calculations before us. I think that was the right way to go. Then you go there and look at the machines, keeping in mind the revenue model, and then you get surprised by the technology, because there is no better black-and-white printer than the [focal product].

These examples effectively demonstrate that, for customers, the way in which the process is performed influences future product and outcome expectations, and ultimately sales outcome. When the events in the process exceed expectations, this has a positive influence on product and outcome expectations. When the customer evaluates the process as favorable, she sees this as a good performance on the part of the seller firm and perceives high performance of the focal product, in turn positively evaluating the likeliness of purchase from the customer. That is, the way in which the process is performed by the selling organization determines the propensity of the customer organization to engage in buying from the seller firm. Therefore, for customers process expectations are highly relevant and the trends regarding process expectations reflect the overall outcome of the selling process.

In conclusion, the findings presented in this chapter 1) reveal how decision-making and expectations are related and unfold over time in the solution selling process for the involved actors, 2) explain the impact that both have on the customer’s final decision to engage in or hold off on purchasing the solution, and 3) identify the way in which the sales cycle is performed as the most formative for customer expectations and purchase decisions. The complexity of solution selling clearly adds to the interplay between decision-making and expectations, considering that all parties are affected in the sales cycle in key steps of the solution selling process. Therefore, the results advance both expectation – sales performance literature and solution selling theory, by demonstrating how the sales outcome is dependent on the relational processes in the solution sales cycle.
5 DISCUSSION

The empirical study explored the characteristics and emergence of expectation positions, how their interrelatedness depends on the actor who experiences them, and their influence on sales outcome through decision-making in the solution selling process. Expectation positions reflect all beliefs an actor holds about the selling of a product and resulting solution in a particular selling process. Through four in-depth case studies I demonstrate the complex interplay between expectations and decisions, their formation throughout the solution selling process, and the effect this has on the short-term outcome of the sales cycle. As such, this study takes an important step towards better understanding how solutions are sold in practice. Moreover, I extend research on the topic by combining the conceptions of expectations and decision-making by demonstrating the importance of the solution selling process for determining sales outcome, in which multiple actors influence the sales cycle through their expectations and decision-making, as opposed to prior studies that have focused on result-based measures. The following sections discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings.

5.1 Theoretical and Managerial implications

5.1.1 Sales outcome consequences of expectation positions’ natures

The data in this research indicate that expectations in the solution selling process are more complex constructs than previously posed. Prior studies have either focused on product expectations from a market level perspective (Ahearne et al., 2010; Beuk et al., 2014; Fu et al., 2010; Hultink & Atuahene-Gima, 2000), or on outcome expectations in terms of return on investment from a sales level perspective (e.g. DeCarlo et al., 1997; Teas & McElroy, 1986). Most of these studies consider an actor’s expectations to be fixed entities, which are not subject to change over time. However, while these prior studies have credited singular types of expectation positions in cross-sectional studies, taken out of context and as static constructs, as an (indirect) predictor of sales performance, I demonstrate in the current study that this is highly problematic for two reasons.

First, actors in the solution selling process experience three types of expectation positions: product, process, and outcome expectations, as the sum of the singular notions of expectations in prior studies (Ahearne et al., 2010; DeCarlo et al., 1997; Tuli et al., 2007). Expectation positions are impermanent in nature, and actors repeatedly adjust their expectations based on the idiosyncrasies in the solution selling process (i.e. the decision-making that evolves the selling process). Thus, the results suggest that sales outcome is determined by the collection of expectations manifested and the decisions taken throughout the solution selling process. Hence, measuring expectation positions in a single observation – before, during, or after the sales cycle – only captures the actor’s perceptions at that particular point in time. Indeed,
Ahearne et al. (2010) acknowledged that this singular measurement may not be representative of the entire sales cycle, and called for the measurement of “both customer and salesperson product perceptions at multiple periods following the product launch” (p. 774). This study is the first to take a process perspective on expectations and their influence on sales outcome, with many expectation positions observed throughout the solution sales cycle.

Second, rather than one-dimensional measures at a certain point in time, expectation positions appear to emerge as multidimensional constructs in the solution selling process, indicating an actor’s ambivalence in assessing a particular event (Kaplan, 1972). Actors can simultaneously experience positive and negative expectation positions, such as in event 7 of Case B, in which the sales representative exerted additional effort to align his positive product expectations to his negative process and outcome expectations. The results show that the more complex the solution sales cycle (as indicated by e.g. the amount of actors involved and their combined interactions and the extensiveness of the offered solution), the more expectations need to be aligned of the customer, but also of sales representatives. Notably, the intensity of an actor’s ambivalence may then call for changes in the level of effort expended (Plambeck & Weber, 2009). As sales effort positively influences sales performance, the decision made at that particular point in time may either facilitate or inhibit the success of the sales cycle. The co-existence of expectation positions at a particular point in the solution selling process indicates that decision-making is done based on multiple levels of evaluation (Kaplan, 1972; Plambeck & Weber, 2009). Thus, the findings explicate the need to consider expectation positions as separate but related constructs, each capturing a component of the total expectations regarding a step in the solution selling process. Researchers should therefore address a more comprehensive set of expectation constructs to understand the dynamics at play that may lead to increased sales effort and sales performance when selling solutions.

5.1.2 The impact of customer process expectations on sales outcome

This study is the first to demonstrate that the actors involved assign different meanings to expectation positions, and how these affect sales outcome in selling solutions. Salespeople relate product and outcome expectations mostly to the acceptance the customer exhibits in the particular sales cycle, but process expectations only are considered in an ad hoc manner (i.e. at the specific event). That is, salespeople do not explicitly regard the evolution of the solution selling process as an important determinant of the likelihood of a successful sales outcome. In contrast, customers experience process expectations as highly important, which rather accurately reflect later purchase decisions. As such, process expectations are highly important when selling solutions, even more important than product and outcome expectations, when seen from a customer perspective. Similar to pure services, for a large extent the perception of
the solution’s quality is influenced by the way the customer experienced the delivery of the sales cycle (Gronroos, 1984). In the current study, this can be extended to include the implications on sales outcome, as outlined below.

Negative process expectations signal to the customer that the seller firm may not have the appropriate capabilities needed to deliver and support an adequate solution, thus linking the customer’s process expectations to her outcome expectations. It is a small step for the customer to relate the negative process expectations to expectations about the fit or quality of the product. In Cases A and D these repeated negative process expectations resulted in the failure of the sales cycle. However, even if the customer proceeds with the sales cycle, the negative perception may linger on in the mind of the customer even during usage of the solution (Tuli et al., 2007), decreasing the customer’s satisfaction with the solution’s implementation and post-deployment support, and we could speculate that this may even affect long term profitability of the solution. Future research is needed to verify this.

5.1.3 Managerial implications
Implications for practice should be taken into account from this study’s findings, which relate to sales outcome through the dynamic interplay of decision-making and expectations in the solution selling process.

First, the study draws attention to the importance of prioritizing establishing and nurturing of effective solution selling processes that are also pleasant for the customer. The findings suggest that customers and sales representatives experience and interpret events in different ways, and partly accumulate these expectations throughout the sales cycle. Sales representatives appear to pay insufficient attention to the differences in interpretation, leading to misinformed expectations and decision-making both internal by actors of the seller firm, and external by the customer. In some cases, this led to such miscommunication that the actions of one actor were not accurately matched to the expectations of other actors. In turn, this resulted in negative sales outcomes in solution selling. As such, the results provide for a better understanding and awareness of these important issues, and I will next provide suggestions for sales practitioners to better deal with them. For example, procedures may be established for the selling of solutions, indicating how such sales processes should be performed. This will guide the sales representatives in the selling process, and may indicate to them the aspects of the sales cycle that should be given more attention. As exemplified in Cases A, B, and D, both internal and external processes could benefit from such an approach. Additionally, to limit miscommunication between the parties involved, it may be important to arrange regular moments of feedback. First, the seller firm may want to streamline their internal communication processes, for instance by the use of standardized checklists for each step in the
selling process. This standardized information sharing would increase the efficiency and accuracy in internal communication, but could also provide a basis for communication with the customer. To accomplish these suggestions, companies should invest in training modules to increase the sales representative’s awareness of the importance of the process of selling the solution. In these trainings, managers should emphasize the value of estimating the proceedings and actions in the process from the customer’s perspective. Moreover, they should offer sales representatives the opportunity to become familiar with this evaluation through participating in case studies during the trainings.

Second, as customers assess the process based on their prior experience or manifested ideals, the way in which much of the information is generated and communicated in each step of the sales cycle is important in (dis)confirming process expectations. During the sales cycle, a trend is established regarding expectations, over time creating the belief that the customer will purchase the proposed solution with increasing certainty. To create an understanding between all parties, sales representatives should apply sufficient effort towards identifying the customer’s needs and engage in regular interactions with the customer for habitual evaluation. Notably, the results suggest that the customer’s trust in the seller firm is important for establishing positive expectations. Moreover, customers noted the importance of demonstrated commitment from the seller firm. For example, the sales representative of Case C showed commitment in the business relationship by initiating the sales cycle with an ROI spreadsheet that illustrated to the customer how he would benefit from implementing a new solution. Conversely, the customer of Case D noted that it seemed not very important to the seller firm to sell them the solution at the particular time, with this lowering the customer’s perception of seller commitment. These examples effectively demonstrate the ways in which sales representatives can enhance or diminish customer expectations, resulting in successful or unsuccessful sales outcomes, respectively. Specifically, sales practitioners should strive to enhance the customer’s perceived commitment of the seller firm, for example by demonstrating the seller’s flexibility. This can be accomplished by allocating resources to the particular selling process and customer, such as through customization of products, ample time allocation to identifying the customer’s needs. Additionally, sales representatives could provide the customer with assistance to enhance the current effectivity of the customer’s product set-up, as was done in Case D (event 8). By demonstrating this trust and commitment towards the customer firm themselves, sales representatives will likely create goodwill from the customer (Gao et al., 2005), thus shaping the customer’s purchase decisions (Gulati, 1995).
5.2 Limitations and further research

This study has some limitations, for which I propose suggestions for further research. First, I focused on examining links between expectations and decision-making, and related these interplays to sales outcome. Obviously, sales outcome is an important measure when determining the effectiveness of a solution selling process; that is, whether or not the sale is successful determines the continuation of the project and result in the implementation of the solution for the customer. However, successful outcomes of the sales cycle may not necessarily result in the provision of solutions that are profitable to the seller firm (Johansson et al., 2003; Day, 2004). Therefore, longer-term implications of the solution selling process should be considered in future research. For example, future research could consider a two-stage approach, the first being the sales cycle until a sales outcome is established, measuring sales outcomes as a result of the interplay between expectations and decision-making. The second stage could cover the remainder of the process (i.e. implementation and support; Tuli et al., 2007), and measure long-term profitability of the solution (Fang et al., 2008).

Second, the study covers four in-depth cases of solution selling processes for four different customers, but these cases originated from a single high-tech B2B firm. Moreover, the four cases together constituted for 90 events, a rather small sample. These two aspects may limit the generalizability of the results. Future studies could consider larger samples, preferably covering other B2B settings. For example, it would increase generalizability to study the solution selling process in other high-tech industries with manufacturing backgrounds. Prior studies have focused on several industries, among which IT, transport machinery, and medical equipment industries in building the concept of servitization and transition strategies (e.g. Gerstner, 2002; Matthyssens & Vandembempt, 2008; Oliva & Kallenberg, 2003; Wise & Baumgartner, 1999). Given the widespread background information on these industries, future research in the current topic could set up a study in these contexts. In doing this, it would be valuable to benchmark the firms of the study by placing them on a spectrum of product versus service (solution) oriented as developed by Oliva and Kallenberg (2003). Specifically, I encourage researchers to include multiple cases across multiple industries, for instance three cases in three industries. Moreover, an important characteristic of the solution selling process is its complexity. However, as the solution selling process is context dependent, it stands to reason that there are varying levels of complexity in different industries. It would be valuable to include this in the research design as well. This could provide insights into differences per firm or industry when examining the influence of expectations and decision-making in the solution selling process and its relationship to sales outcome, and will increase generalizability of the results.
Third, as the most important interfaces in the solution selling process (Cova & Salle, 2007; Tuli et al., 2007), I examined the insights of actors from both the customer firm and seller firm, and subsequently the interactions between them. In some sales cycles, however, more stakeholders may be involved. For example, as opposed to one supplier (i.e. the seller firm), the customer firm could involve multiple suppliers of solutions in the sales cycle. Conversely, it may be important for customers to involve their customers in the decisions whether or not to purchase a certain solution, as was done in Cases B and C. Here, the customer’s major customers were asked to assess the quality of the products produced by the proposed solution. Future research may want to regard the customer as the focal firm of the study, instead of the seller firm, through this widening the network of supplying firms and customers that may be involved in the purchase of a solution (Davies et al., 2007; Windahl & Lakemond, 2006).

Finally, the current study focused on decision-making and expectations in the solution selling process. While not the focus of this study, interview respondents noted the importance of customer trust and commitment from both the customer and seller firm in the process. As such, future studies could include these variables. Organizational purchasing studies have found that the customer’s uncertainty can be reduced by enhanced trust and commitment of the seller firm (Gao et al., 2005). However, it has not yet been explored how exactly this is done in the process of selling solutions, and how specifically this links to the expectations and decision-making of multiple actors. Thus, future research could address these constructs that may be involved in the effects of the decision-expectation interplay on sales outcome. Moreover, much of the literature about sales expectations considers attributions and motivations as a big part of determining sales effort – and thus decisions – and their impact on sales performance (e.g. Johnston & Kim, 1994; Teas and McElroy, 1986). Therefore, future research could explore how attributions and motivations come into the solution selling process, to more comprehensively study the ways in which decision-making and expectations affect sales outcome. This research classified expectations positions as positive, mixed, and negative. Although mixed expectation positions concern both positive and negative remarks from the particular respondent, it is of course not necessarily an equal split in these expectations. Therefore, future research should include more nuanced expectation positions, for instance through substituting three combined expectation positions, to better reflect the gradations in responses. This could result in five expectation positions in total: positive, predominantly positive, mixed, predominantly negative, and negative expectation positions.
6 BIBLIOGRAPHY


### APPENDIX A: DECISION-MAKING AND EXPECTATIONS FOR KEY EVENTS, CASE A

Table 3. Decision-making and expectation positions for key events, Case A. AC = Account Manager, SC = Solution Consultant, SM = Sales Manager, CD = Customer Decision Maker.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Initial Expectation Position</th>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Decision makers</th>
<th>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>AC: Positive Outcome</td>
<td>Act on information that new solution was required</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC: Positive Process</td>
<td>Replacement of [competitor solution], integrating two subsidiaries, so we said we could do that. We really convinced them and so we got going. The customer thought we would be a good fit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>Create added value with additional software product</td>
<td>AC, SM</td>
<td>SM: Positive Product, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>So we thought, let’s create additional value for the customer with [additional software product].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>Which products to show in the demonstration</td>
<td>AC, SC</td>
<td>SC: Positive Product, Mixed Process, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>[Account Manager] said that the customer was used to [competitor products], and then we are usually inclined to think along those lines so we don’t make the process too difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>AC: Mixed Process, Mixed Outcome CD: Mixed Process</td>
<td>Software product is too expensive, also need other features</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product CD: Mixed Product, Negative Process, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>But then you have software, and they question whether or not they can recoup the costs. Still it can be [sold], but then there has to be a solid business case for it. It turned out they also wanted to make books offline... So there was a chance that they would chose the competitor [solution].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Initial Expectation Position</td>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Decision makers</td>
<td>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</td>
<td>Illustrative quote</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>AC: Negative Outcome</td>
<td>Let customer make ROI themselves</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Mixed Outcome SM: Positive Process, Positive Outcome CD: Mixed Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>They cannot really translate that to what they will earn from it. And I didn’t make a real ROI model how they could earn back those costs. You should have that, actually ... Then customers can better see where the profit will be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>AC: Positive Process, Negative Outcome CD: Mixed Product, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>Software product may not be the right addition</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>They said that it could be that [additional software product] has to wait and they also said there was not really a need for it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>CD: Mixed Product, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>Offered solution is not accepted by customer, sale ends unsuccessfully</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>AC: Negative Outcome CD: Negative Outcome</td>
<td>They think it’s a really big investment. Could be that they want it [solution] later sometime. They said they didn’t want to buy the solution now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**APPENDIX B: DECISION-MAKING AND EXPECTATIONS FOR KEY EVENTS, CASE B**

Table 4. Decision-making and expectation positions for key events, Case B. AC = Account Manager, SC1 = Solution Consultant 1, SC2 = Solution Consultant 2, PS = Product Specialist, MS = Marketing Specialist, CD = Customer Decision Maker.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Initial Expectation Position</th>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Decision makers</th>
<th>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>AC: Positive Outcome</td>
<td>Workflow needs to be configured/ tackled</td>
<td>CD, AC</td>
<td>AC: Mixed Process, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>And so I indicated: that workflow really needs some work. And they acknowledged that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SC1: Positive Product</td>
<td>There is a good fit of the product and solution for the customer</td>
<td>SC1</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Process</td>
<td>I just had a demo of [focal product] and I thought that there would be a good fit with [focal product] and the customer’s organization that for which a solution should be established ... But with these conversations I immediately had an inclination that this [focal product] could be it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SC1: Positive Produce</td>
<td>Exert extra effort to sell the product internally</td>
<td>SC1</td>
<td>SC1: Positive Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome SC2: Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>And then I had a problem of course, because it was one of the first sales cycles that we ran and so I had to sell it here internally as well. And then it became annoying, because no one dared to commit to it ... So I experienced that part as very annoying and on top of that it cost me a lot of effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Negative Process, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>Customer requests software product in the solution</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Process, Positive Outcome MS: Positive Product, Positive Process, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>The customer was rather excited. Because we went to talk to them after the first presentation. I saw things there that we could tackle with it [product]. And on that they unequivocally said yes that they wanted to have it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Initial Expectation Position</td>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Decision makers</td>
<td>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</td>
<td>Illustrative quote</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>PS: Negative Product, Mixed Outcome SC2: Mixed Product, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>Software product is not a good fit for customer. Solution should not be created</td>
<td>PS, SC2</td>
<td>AC: Mixed Outcome MS: Positive Product SC1: Positive Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>In the beginning I had a rather passive role, because I doubted [the product]. I was proactive towards sales, but with conservatism whether the product would be good here. I communicated that by conveying my doubts and discussing it. Then a compromise arises and that continues to be the new truth. And that happens all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>SC2: Mixed Product, Positive Process, Positive Outcome SC1: Positive Product, Negative Process, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>Software product can be a good fit in the solution for the customer</td>
<td>PS, SC2</td>
<td>SC1: Negative Process AC: Mixed Product, Mixed Process</td>
<td>So it was really about functionality, because it didn’t work exactly as we expected beforehand. So we developed another idea how it could work ... So in the end we decided that it would work with the customer’s current way of working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>MS: Positive Product, Positive Process, Mixed Outcome PS: Mixed Product, Positive Process</td>
<td>Solution needs different elements than previously thought</td>
<td>SC1</td>
<td>SC1: Mixed Process AC: Positive Process</td>
<td>With that second analysis we found a few new things that we did not consider before ... So there were a few things that we decided we should do differently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>SC2: Mixed Product SC1: Positive Process</td>
<td>Solution needs customization of products</td>
<td>SC1, SC2</td>
<td>SC2: Positive Outcome PS: Positive Product</td>
<td>Ultimately, in consultation with [supplier design site], we initiated a product structure ourselves and proposed recommendation of this to [customer].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Initial Expectation Position</td>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Decision makers</td>
<td>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</td>
<td>Illustrative quote</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>AC: Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>Communicate hardware costs in quotation, while not communicated before</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC: Negative Outcome SC1: Negative Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>So we have to explain to the customer who didn’t even have any automation that he also needs to buy hardware. And we need to explain why he needs that hardware. So the customer was not amused. No, he wasn’t happy with that at all. So at that point I thought: you know, buy it somewhere else, then.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>AC: Negative Outcome</td>
<td>Customer accepts offered solution is accepted and signs deal</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>AC: Mixed Product, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>The hardware costs, that was a shock for them [customer], but they could not really back out. They had seen what could be done if they implemented the solution, so then finally they accepted the hardware costs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX C: DECISION-MAKING AND EXPECTATIONS FOR KEY EVENTS, CASE C

Table 5. Decision-making and expectation positions for key events, Case C. AC = Account Manager, SC = Solution Consultant, CD = Customer Decision Maker.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Initial Expectation Position</th>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Decision makers</th>
<th>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>AC: Positive Process, Positive Outcome CD: Positive Process, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>Start project based on trend analysis (preliminary initiation)</td>
<td>CD, AC</td>
<td></td>
<td>The report; you look into it and then you calculate whether it is correct. You check if it can provide advantages for [customer firm]. So you keep in contact [with the Account Manager] and you follow of course the sales advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>AC: Positive Process CD: Positive Process</td>
<td>Explicitly start project based on end-customer feedback</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td></td>
<td>They spoke with the customer to do it [produce] in color, because it has a higher attention value and it’s safer. The customer agreed and from there came the ultimate need, from the customer of the customer. That meant we had a nice case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>AC: Positive Process CD: Positive Process</td>
<td>Product is right product for customer, based on prior experience. Build a solution around it</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Process CD: Positive Process, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>So they already knew it [focal product]. So when the color machines also got equipped with [focal product], it was no issue for [customer]. They really wanted to have that because it was very user friendly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Process</td>
<td>Make ROI model for presentation</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Process CD: Positive Process</td>
<td>[Account Manager] had done his homework. When he first came to us he already presented the revenue model for our future. That is very valuable. In this instance sat [Account Manager] with calculations before us. I think that was the right way to go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Initial Expectation Position</td>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Decision makers</td>
<td>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product CD: Mixed Product</td>
<td>More benchmarking is needed</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>And if you also want to do a good benchmark with other suppliers, then it takes several months. So we wanted to do more benchmarking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>AC: Positive Process SC: Positive Product</td>
<td>Decide to demonstrate additional products to increase customer's anticipation</td>
<td>AC, SC</td>
<td>Then you go there and look at the machines, keeping in mind the revenue model, and then you get surprised by the technology, because there is no better black-and-white printer than the [focal product].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>CD: Positive Product</td>
<td>Solution is perceived best out of benchmarking, but first more tests are required</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>That benchmark was largely done. The project group had made their decision, but we wanted to do extra tests.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>CD: Positive Product, Positive Outcome AC: Positive Outcome</td>
<td>After presentation to end-customer, customer gives go ahead for solution</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>And they also presented it to their customer. They got back from the customer that it looked good, and that they could send it along with their products.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Process</td>
<td>Offer a total package for solution quotation</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>We name a price, but we translate that into yields that they [customer firm] can achieve with it. So here they could save costs for one employee each month … So it is the total package for the solution that I show them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>AC: Positive Outcome</td>
<td>Customer accepts offered solution is accepted and signs deal</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>We could not go around it, we could not justify not buying it [solution] at this point. So we were very happy with that.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX D: DECISION-MAKING AND EXPECTATIONS FOR KEY EVENTS, CASE D

Table 6. Decision-making and expectation positions for key events, Case D. AC = Account Manager, SC = Solution Consultant, PS = Product Specialist, CD = Customer Decision Maker, CF = Customer Field Manager.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Initial Expectation Position</th>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Decision makers</th>
<th>Resulting Expectation Position</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>PS: Positive Product</td>
<td>Set up presentation for customer</td>
<td>PS, SM</td>
<td>CD: Mixed Product, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>So I established that contact. And I have to say that I really pushed for the new product. Then we arranged a meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>PS: Positive Product</td>
<td>Product does not fit needs well, based on presentation</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>PS: Negative Process CD: Negative Product, Mixed Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>What went wrong there is that one person wanted to generally explain the main vantage point of the product, while the other wanted to talk about the content of the product. And that didn’t match, because the content was not yet available at that moment ... Afterwards I got from both men the feedback that it didn’t meet expectations. Especially [customer decision maker] voiced that the product would probably not be beneficial for the [customer site].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>PS: Negative Process, Negative Outcome SC: Negative Process, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>Initiate project including multiple actors from both seller firm and customer firm</td>
<td>AC, CD</td>
<td>CD: Mixed Outcome PS: Mixed Outcome SC: Negative Process, Negative Outcome AC: Positive Product, Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>So he [customer] wanted to thoroughly create a project and do it well. So we decided that together based on [customer]’s opinion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Initial Expectation Position</td>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Decision makers</td>
<td>Resulting Expectation Position (if changed)</td>
<td>Illustrative quote</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>CF: Positive Product, Positive Process, Mixed Outcome CD: Mixed Outcome SC: Positive Process, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>Software product is not a fit for customer. Solution should not be created</td>
<td>CD, CF, SM</td>
<td>CF: Negative Process CD: Negative Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome PS: Mixed Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome SC: Negative Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>The analysis of the customer’s problems should be way before a presentation like that. I pushed for that analysis of the problems, because I heard there would be a meeting that afternoon and I was expected to come. It would be about [customer firm], but I don’t know anything about that customer! … So I was supposed to form an opinion about the fit of the product by that afternoon … This meeting should have been later in the process, because then you get a very different discussion. Then you are focused on one problem instead of on the product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>SC: Negative Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>Continue project, start analysis of needs based on personal perception of fit</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>SC: Positive Product, Negative Process, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>We continued to convert the need analysis into a functional design and we showed that to him [customer] … We thought we could turn it [the process].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>CF: Negative Product CD: Negative Product</td>
<td>Offering is not up to standards, needs are not clear</td>
<td>CD, CF</td>
<td>CF: Mixed Process</td>
<td>I thought then that it could not automate our whole production. So not suitable … If the need is not clear, the offer can also not fit it well … But we also never got the question to really analyze the need to prevent these kinds of miscommunication.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Event</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>PS: Mixed Process</td>
<td>Concretizing of offering is not sufficient; exert more effort</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>PS: Positive Product, Mixed Process&lt;br&gt;CD: Mixed Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>So I try to let happen what I think is good in the process. From [solution consultant] or [customer] I do that, also to make sure that the process keeps unfolding and that a solution is developed. Because otherwise it takes way too long.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>CD: Negative Product, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>Explicit customer needs: solution should be integrated with existing products</td>
<td>AC, CD</td>
<td>AC: Positive Product, Positive Outcome</td>
<td>One of the choices we made is that [competitor product] should be integrated for all customer in the solution ... But based on my earlier experiences, I didn’t think they [seller firm] could do it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>CD: Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>Request quotation</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>CD: Negative Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome&lt;br&gt;SC: Negative Process&lt;br&gt;AC: Mixed Outcome</td>
<td>... I had at that time asked for a cost indication or a quotation of how the trajectory would be further on. To get insight into the risks and efforts, and so also the resources we would need to implement the solution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>CD: Negative Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>Offered solution is not sufficient, sale ends unsuccessfully</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>AC: Mixed Product, Negative Process, Negative Outcome</td>
<td>My final notice that we would not continue at that moment was based on disappointment ... And for that [quotation request] I have, if I remember correctly, not or barely received any feedback. Hence I thought: “if this is already so rigid – and I had received feedback from my own people about the order flow – why would I continue [with the purchase]?</td>
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