Converging on a New Theoretical Foundation for Selling

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Converging on a New Theoretical Foundation for Selling

This article demonstrates that the sales literature is converging on a systemic and institutional perspective that recognizes that selling and value creation unfold over time and are embedded in broader social systems. This convergence illustrates that selling needs a more robust theoretical foundation. To contribute to this foundation, the authors draw on institutional theory and service-dominant logic to advance a service ecosystems perspective. This perspective leads them to redefine selling in terms of the interaction between actors aimed at creating and maintaining thin crossing points—the locations at which service can be efficiently exchanged for service—through the ongoing alignment of institutional arrangements and the optimization of relationships. This definition underscores how broad sets of human actors engage in selling processes, regardless of the roles that characterize them (e.g., firm, customer, stakeholder). A service ecosystems perspective reveals (1) that selling continues to be an essential activity, (2) how broader sets of actors participate in selling processes, and (3) how this participation may be changing. It leads to novel insights and questions regarding gaining and maintaining business, managing intrafirm and broad external selling actors, and sales performance.

Keywords: marketing theory, selling and sales management, institutional theory, service-dominant logic

Over the last decade, sales scholars and practitioners have debated what selling entails, how salespeople participate in value creation, and whether the importance of salespeople is increasing or decreasing. The commonly described catalyst for these debates is a rising degree of market complexity caused by increasing customer demands, globalization, buying and selling centers, number of offerings, technological advancements, competitive challenges, and buyer access to information (see Hunter and Perreault 2007; Jones, Chonko, and Roberts 2004; Moncrief and Marshall 2005; Rackham and DeVincentis 1998; Schmitz and Ganesan 2014; Sheth and Sharma 2008).

While markets are continually changing, we caution against premature conjectures that these changes necessarily alter what selling entails, how salespeople participate in value creation, and/or the importance of salespeople. Instead, we suggest these changes point toward the inadequacy of traditional, restricted, firm-centric, unidirectional, and dyadic views of sales processes. These changes, therefore, point to the need for a more robust theoretical foundation that better explicates the processes and roles of selling in value cocreation through market exchange.

The contemporary sales literature seems to confirm this contention. For example, it indicates a changing view of the sales process from one that is linear and focused almost entirely on the buyer–seller dyad to one that is nonlinear and involves many actors (Dixon and Tanner 2012; Moncrief and Marshall 2005). This literature emphasizes the importance of intrafirm and external actors to selling and sales processes (Bolander et al. 2015; Plouffe et al. 2016) and points to the broadening and blurring of sales-oriented tasks and responsibilities to include those traditionally associated with other roles as reasons why a more holistic approach is needed in research and practice (Hughes, Le Bon, and Malshe 2012; Rapp et al. 2017). Considered together, the literature appears to recognize a need for a "revised perspective" (MacInnis 2011) that can account for the multidirectional nature of sales processes and how these processes are situated in complex, dynamic exchange systems of value creation.

This revision of perspective reflects a broader transition in the understanding of value creation both within and outside of marketing. Compared with more traditional models of firm-created, value-laden output that is delivered to a waiting "consumer," new models portray value as an outcome (e.g., Vargo and Lusch 2004) cocreated (e.g., Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) in networks (e.g., Hakansson and Snehota 1995) and systems (e.g., Edvardsson et al. 2014). The roles of institutions (i.e., practices, assumptions, norms, laws, beliefs, and values, among other coordinating heuristics) are also becoming apparent (e.g., Humphreys 2010; Press et al. 2014; Vargo and Lusch 2016). Furthermore, this revision of perspective reflects recent work on the conditions under which transactions take place (e.g., Baldwin 2008).

We invoke the service ecosystems perspective of service-dominant (S-D) logic, which is based on the premise that broad sets of actors dynamically integrate and apply resources through service-for-service exchange (i.e., the application of knowledge for the benefit of another) to cocreate value (Vargo and Lusch

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2004, 2016). We suggest this service ecosystems perspective offers a robust theoretical framework for examining selling and sales-related phenomena. It mandates an understanding of institutions and institutional arrangements (i.e., "interdependent assemblages of institutions" [Vargo and Lusch 2016, p. 6]) as coordinating mechanisms that enable and constrain value creation practices.

A service ecosystems perspective increases the range of activities and the number of actors considered to be involved in selling. This perspective expands the view from dyadic exchange to broader value creation practices influenced by institutional arrangements and institutionalization processes. It accommodates micro-level outcomes, such as sales performance (e.g., sales revenue, percentage of quota met) and buyer–seller relations (e.g., relationship quality, perceived value) (Ahearne et al. 2013; Hall, Ahearne, and Sujan 2015; Hughes, Le Bon, and Rapp 2013; Mullins et al. 2014) and also highlights the importance of often-ignored emergent, meso- and macro-level institutional structures related to selling, such as markets and industries and their roles both as outcomes and contexts (Giddens 1984). To elaborate our theoretical foundation, we also draw on the work of Baldwin (2008; Baldwin and Clark 2000), which explores the interplays of formal and relational exchanges across "thin" and "thick" crossing points related to these emergent structures. This showcases the importance of institutional work—the maintaining, disrupting, and changing of institutional structures (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006)—in selling processes.

This article makes three contributions to the sales literature. First, it offers a theoretical foundation that reframes conceptions of what selling is and the activities it encompasses. Using the service ecosystems perspective of S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 2016), which highlights that value is always cocreated by multiple actors, we show that salespeople and other actors foster service-for-service exchange and value cocreation by participating in institutionalization processes. These institutionalization processes include the creation of knowledge structures that aid in sense making and legitimation (Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy 2004; Suchman 1995; Weick 1995). To explicate the mechanisms for these processes, we introduce a framework that points to discursive and dialogical interactions among broad sets of actors.

Second, the article contributes to the sales literature by reconceptualizing and broadening the scope and roles of various actors in the sales process. Traditionally, selling refers to an attempt by a salesperson to persuade a buyer to accept a value proposition. Alternatively, we define selling in terms of the interaction between actors aimed at creating and maintaining thin crossing points—the locations at which service can be efficiently exchanged for service—through the ongoing alignment of institutional arrangements and the optimization of relationships. As we detail, this reconceptualization highlights the importance of distinguishing between salespeople and broader sets of actors who engage in selling activities. Thus, we use the "salespeople" classification for actors whose professional roles (i.e., job descriptions and titles) are sales-centric and the broader "selling actor" classification for all actors who perform selling regardless of their role. That is, the selling actor classification includes salespeople but is not limited to them.

Third, this article contributes to the sales literature by addressing unresolved questions about whether changes in markets are changing the roles of salespeople. As Rackham and DeVincentis (1998) and Jones et al. (2004) highlight, some theoreticians and practitioners believe that changes in modern markets will diminish the strategic importance of salespeople, perhaps making them obsolete. Conversely, others argue that modern markets are increasing the strategic importance of salespeople (Cron et al. 2014; Hunter and Perreault 2007) and that their importance is likely to increase. A service ecosystems perspective reconciles these inconsistent viewpoints by reframing the fundamental mechanisms of selling. This perspective illustrates how markets have always been complex and dynamic and how selling actors have always been and continue to be involved in institutionalization processes that resolve inconsistencies and contradictions in the institutional arrangements of various actors. However, changes in modern communication tools enable nontraditional actors to engage in selling and may, ironically, mask selling processes.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we show that the sales literature, like the broader marketing literature, is converging on a service ecosystems perspective that views value as cocreated through the involvement of broad sets of actors. Second, we propose that this perspective can serve as the foundation for a unifying theoretical framework for sales. Third, we describe the characteristics of "crossing points," the locations at which service is exchanged for service, and we highlight the role of institutional arrangements in shaping these crossing points. Fourth, we redefine "selling," introduce a discursive framework that explicates the role of narratives (i.e., written, spoken, or symbolic accounts that offer interpretation, explanation, or meaning to events or actions [Czarniawska 2004]) in selling processes, and highlight the fundamental similarities among actors in what are traditionally referred to as sales and nonsales roles. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this research. Throughout, we draw on concepts and literatures that might be unfamiliar to some readers. To assist, we define key terms in Table 1.

Transitioning Toward a Service Ecosystems Perspective for the Sales Literature

Evolution of the Sales Literature

The "birth" of the modern salesperson is often attributed to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century with the development of mass manufacturing (Friedman 2005). Because of the influence of classical and neoclassical economics, value was then thought to be created and embedded in goods by selling firms through the manufacturing process (Vargo and Lusch 2004). The role of salespeople was generally perceived to comprise the facilitation and negotiation of the transfer of value from sellers to buyers. This view contributed to a transactional selling orientation that emphasized short-term outcomes, a clear winner in exchange, and the salesperson's ability to manipulate buyers to produce self-serving results (Jolson 1997).

TABLE 1
Definitions of Key Terms

Key Term	Definition	Source
Institutions	"Institutions comprise regulative, normative, and cultural cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (p. 56).	Scott (2013)
Institutional arrangements	Institutional arrangements are "interdependent assemblages of institutions" (p. 6). Institutional arrangements serve as sets of "value assumptions, cognitive frames, rules, and routines" (pp. 14–15) that guide actors in exchanging service with other actors.	Vargo and Lusch (2016)
Institutional work	The purposive action of actors "aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (p. 217).	Lawrence and Suddaby (2006)
Service ecosystems	Service ecosystems are "relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system[s] of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange" (pp. 10–11).	Vargo and Lusch (2016)
Selling	The interaction between actors aimed at creating and maintaining thin crossing points—the locations at which service can be efficiently exchanged for service—through the ongoing alignment of institutional arrangements and the optimization of relationships.	Current article
Subsystem or module	A subsystem or module is "a group of elements, such as tasks, that are highly interdependent on one another, but only minimally dependent on what happens in other modules" (p. 63).	Baldwin and Clark (2000)
Aligned institutional arrangements of service exchange	The institutional arrangements that facilitate service exchange. Set of institutions related to the knowledge, abilities, skills, and other resources that will be reciprocally exchanged, as well as how and when they will be exchanged.	Adapted from Baldwin and Clark (2000); Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006)
Narrative infrastructure	The alignment of multiple stories that, through their compelling character, gain the capacity to shape the institutional arrangements of systemic actors.	Deuten and Rip (2000)

However, since the 1970s, researchers and practitioners have increasingly recognized the importance of relationship selling. Relationship selling emphasizes the roles of salespeople in developing and maintaining relationships with buyers for mutual long-term benefits (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Weitz and Bradford 1999). As Jolson (1997) explains, "Instead of viewing selling as a series of struggles that the salesperson must win from a steady stream of prospects and customers of all sizes and shapes, relationship selling or partnering focuses on the building of mutual trust within the buyer–seller dyad with a delivery of anticipated, long-term, value-added benefits to buyers" (p. 76).

Recent sales orientations, such as consultative and enterprise selling (Rackham and DeVincentis 1998), accentuate characteristics of relationship selling (e.g., trust, long-term emphasis on benefits). Such orientations also increasingly question narrow buyer–seller dyads and point out that selling and value creation unfold over time in complex systems involving many actors.

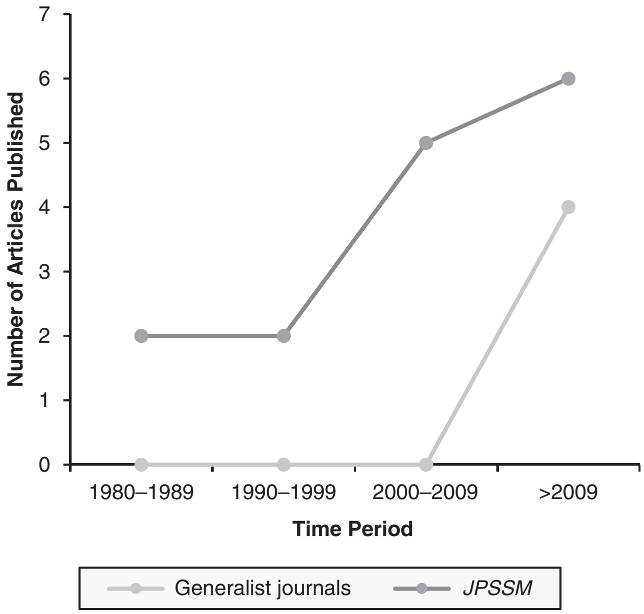
Consultative selling, for example, which Rackham and DeVincentis (1998) attribute to increasingly sophisticated buyers and buying processes, emphasizes the importance of salespeople providing buyers with information, helping buyers discover and understand needs, determining and providing adequate and often customized solutions, performing nonselling tasks (e.g., planning, analysis, preparing proposals), and involving additional personnel in sales efforts. Such tasks necessitate the awareness and participation of broad (sets of) actors in value creation (e.g., competitors and collaborators of both the selling and buying organizations, intra- and interfunctional actors). Only with such awareness and participation can salespeople learn and communicate the tailored ramifications of competitors and other actor developments, determine and communicate how the seller and selling organization can benefit the buyer's organization, and identify and coordinate the involvement of other actors, among other things. A Bose salesperson, for example, makes tailored proposals to automotive manufacturers based on the broad involvement of actors (e.g., procurement, engineering, design, marketing) from the buying and selling organizations as well as other market actors (e.g., industry experts, other customers) to transfer home and music venue audio technology to optimize vehicle specific sound dynamics.

Enterprise selling adopts and extends the principles of consultative selling to emphasize that buyers aim to benefit from the knowledge and skills of the entire selling organization. That is, as Rackham and DeVincentis (1998) describe, enterprise selling emphasizes developing close-knit buyer–seller interfaces to leverage the knowledge sets and skills of many different actors and functions of both the selling and buying organization to create value. Therefore, enterprise selling often results in even broader and deeper integration of the buying and selling organization than does consultative selling. It also results in broader awareness and participation of a greater number of actors involved in value creation, given the numerous cross-functional and cross-organizational actors involved who themselves are embedded in networks of actors. Consequently, any individual actor or function has limited ability to initiate and maintain an enterprise relationship. Consider, as an example of enterprise selling, Amazon's solutions for small businesses. As of 2017, such solutions include access to a rich e-commerce platform, as well as vast services (e.g., customer service, multichannel fulfillment, loans, and information technology) that broadly integrate both organizations' knowledge sets and skill bases.

In line with an enterprise selling orientation, scholars (e.g., Bolander et al. 2015; Dixon and Tanner 2012; Friend and Malshe 2016; Hughes, Le Bon, and Malshe 2012; Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, and Wilson 2016; Plouffe et al. 2016; Rapp et al. 2017) are increasingly recognizing that selling and value creation unfold over time in complex systems involving many actors. Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, and Wilson's (2016) findings, for example, propose that value emerges over time and that value propositions are mutually defined and depend "on the quality not only of the supplier's resources and processes but also of customer resources and processes as well as of the joint resource integration process" (p. 97). Much like practitioners, Dixon and Tanner (2012) report that scholars are beginning to view the selling process as nonlinear and involving many actors instead of viewing it as a linear multistep process that may focus too closely on the buyer and salesperson. Others (e.g., Hughes, Le Bon, and Malshe 2012; Rapp et al. 2017) argue that the sales function is increasingly broadening, blurring with other functions, and reciprocally influencing other firm functional areas and that these are reasons why a holistic approach is needed.

To evaluate the extent to which the sales literature employs a systemic perspective, we performed a frequency analysis of articles in marketing's leading generalist journals (i.e., *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Marketing Science*) as well as the specialized *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, whose abstracts used terms characteristic of a systemic perspective. As Figure 1 shows, the results, which are consistent with our observations of work published in other reputable outlets, indicate that the sales literature is increasingly adopting such a systemic perspective. Table 2 depicts the evolution of the three discussed sales orientations to further support our conclusion. Next, we argue that this systemic perspective requires a theoretical foundation that recognizes the roles of institutional arrangements in enabling and constraining value creation practices.

FIGURE 1
Published Sales-Oriented Articles Adopting a Systemic Perspective



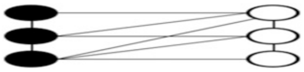
Notes: *JPSSM* = *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*.

Systemic and Institutional Thought in Marketing and Sales

As Scott (2013) explains, "Institutions are multifaceted, durable social structures made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources" (p. 57). Institutions "provide stability and meaning to social life" (p. 56) and, thus, efficiently and often effectively guide actors' practices. Vargo and Lusch (2016) posit that institutions permit coordination among actors and "enable actors to accomplish an ever-increasing level of service exchange and value cocreation under [inherent] time and cognitive constraints" (p. 11). Therefore, the study of institutions can aid understandings of what selling is and how selling actors facilitate value cocreation for their own firms, buying firms, and broader sets of actors.

Early marketing literature (e.g., Alderson 1957; Arndt 1981; Duddy and Revzan 1953; Hunt 1981; Revzan 1968; Weld 1916) emphasizes systemic and institutional approaches that account for actors' functions, roles, interactions, and relational mechanisms as foundational to marketing. Despite this early recognition, systemic and institutional thought has not received

TABLE 2
Evolving Perspectives Within the Sales Literature

		Relationship	
	Transactional	**Consultative**	**Enterprise**
Perception of value creation	The selling firm creates value and delivers it to the buying firm.	The selling firm creates value and delivers it to the buying firm.	The selling firm cocreates value with the buying firm.
Perceived ability of salesperson to influence purchase	High	High to medium	Medium to low
Competition and cooperation between sellers and buyers	Salespeople and buyers compete with one another to win, at the expense of the other.	Selling and buying actors collaborate with one another to facilitate win-win exchange.	Many actors from the selling and buying firm collaborate with one another to facilitate win-win exchange.
Involvement in Exchange			
Selling actor	Salespeople find prospective buyers and assess whether the prospective buyer should be 'sold' to. Then, they deliver value propositions, negotiate exchange terms, and coordinate the flow of value from the selling firm to the buying firm.	Salespeople and buyers develop trust-based, mutually beneficial long-term relationships. Salespeople provide buyers with information, help buyers discover and understand needs, determine and provide a solution, and involve other relevant actors from the selling firm.	Salespeople and many other cross-functional actors from both the selling and buying firms aid the development of trust-based, mutually beneficial long-term relationships and work together on tasks that result in a deeper integration of both organizations.
Number of actors	Two (salesperson and buyer)	Two to several (increasing recognition of broader actor involvement both in selling and buying)	Many (broad involvement of buying and selling actors)
			

Notes: ● = selling actor; ○ = buying actor.

prominent attention in the marketing and sales literature streams. However, contemporary marketing work (e.g., Edvardsson et al. 2014; Hillebrand, Driessen, and Koll 2015; Vargo and Lusch 2016; Webster and Lusch 2013) is revitalizing awareness that systemic and institutional thought is foundational to marketing and, arguably, also to sales. Edvardsson et al. (2014, p. 303), for example, state that institutional arrangements "coordinate the activities of resource integration by shaping the actors' value cocreation behavior in service systems," and Vargo and Lusch (2016, p. 5) claim that institutional arrangements are "the keys to understanding human systems and social activity, such as value cocreation, in general."

This contemporary marketing literature is greatly influenced by sociological and organizational theory, which has made significant progress in overcoming overly rational and static views on institutions. Specifically, scholars such as Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1984), and DiMaggio (1988) clarify the enabling and constraining properties of institutions by addressing the tensions between structure (i.e., normative constraints) and agency (i.e., the ability to act independently). Similarly, Scott (2013) claims that "institutions provide stimulus, guidelines, and resources for acting as well as prohibitions and constraints on actions" (p. 58) and argues that institutions comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements.

The regulative element comprises processes that have "the capacity to establish rules, inspect other's conformity to them, and as necessary manipulate sanctions—rewards or punishments—in an attempt to influence future behavior" (Scott 2013, p. 59). These sanctions can be formal (e.g., licenses or court punishments) or informal (e.g., losing or gaining face through shaming or legitimizing activities) (North 1990). The normative element describes prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimensions of social life. This element emphasizes values and norms and how these values and norms shape actor roles. Accordingly, the normative element emphasizes desired ends (e.g., goals, objectives) as well as how actors may pursue them.

Finally, the cultural-cognitive element comprises "the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and create the frames through which meaning is made" (Scott 2013, p. 67) or, stated alternatively, what underlies the habitual actions of actors. Jointly, these three pillars span the conscious and the unconscious, or, similarly, the legally enforceable and the taken-for-granted elements of institutions (Hoffman 2001; Scott 2013).

In marketing, the three institutional pillars are used both explicitly and implicitly. For example, work on industries, channels, and strategic orientations by Humphreys (2010), Grewal and Dharwadkar (2002), and Press et al. (2014) explicitly highlights the importance of these institutional pillars.

However, most work examining selling and buyer–seller relationships has addressed these three institutional pillars implicitly and atomistically. Not surprisingly, much work on selling and buyer–seller relationships has focused on regulative elements that can be monitored and sanctioned, such as formal contracts that often define responsibilities, measures, and compensations. Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987), for example, highlight the importance of contractual obligations, such as exchange timing, planning, and relative allocation of benefits and costs, in relationship development processes between sellers and buyers.

However, the costs of employing comprehensive formal contracts to account for every responsibility, measure, and compensation when exchanges are complex can become excessive (Baldwin 2008) and can potentially surmount the value offered by the exchange itself. This limitation of incomplete contracts highlights the importance of the normative pillar in structuring economically efficient relationships. Complementing Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987), Heide and John (1992) as well as Cannon, Achrol, and Gundlach (2000) point to the importance of relational norms, such as flexibility, solidarity, mutuality, harmonizing of conflict, and restraint in the use of power, to safeguarding relationships. The normative element, however, is not limited to relational norms and contracts but also emphasizes what ends are desired as well as how actors may pursue them. The sales literature, as stated, has argued that salespeople increasingly take on the role of knowledge brokers and consultants that aid buyers, their own firms, and other actors in better understanding insights and implications of ever-changing problems, markets, and potential solutions to cocreate mutual long-term benefits (Rapp et al. 2014; Sheth and Sharma 2008; Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal 2011).

Finally, the cultural-cognitive element is also crucial in understanding buyer–seller relationships and selling because cultural models "are heterogeneously distributed across a population and serve as cognitive resources and templates that help people navigate the world around them" (Blocker et al. 2012, p. 23). Work on consumer culture theory, for example, highlights not only "the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings" but also how "product symbolism [and] ritual practices" shape patterns of behavior and sense making (Arnould and Thompson 2005, pp. 869–70). Similarly, work on the social construction of technology has highlighted that resources are "socially constructed by [systemic] actors through the different meanings they attach to [them] and the various features they emphasize and use" (Orlikowski 1992, p. 406). Consequently, selling and exchange practices cannot be understood without taking the cultural-cognitive element into consideration.

Actor Coordination in Service Ecosystems

S-D Logic and Its Emphasis on Service Ecosystems

The previous two sections showcase that the sales and marketing literature streams are converging on a systemic perspective that highlights the importance of institutional arrangements. To provide a theoretical foundation for this perspective, we introduce the S-D logic framework and its core contentions. Service-dominant logic emphasizes that "marketing activity, and economic activity in general, is best understood in terms of service-for-service exchange" (Vargo and Lusch 2017). Service, in this framework, is conceptualized as the application of one actor's resources for the benefit of another actor. Service-dominant logic posits that value cocreation takes place in systems, because the resources used in service exchange typically come from a variety of private, public, and market-facing sources—that is, from a variety of other actors. Furthermore, S-D logic asserts that actors' resource integration and value cocreation practices are enabled and constrained by institutional arrangements (Vargo and Lusch 2016).

In short, S-D logic theorizes that value cocreation takes place in service ecosystems—that is, "relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system[s] of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange" (Vargo and Lusch 2016, pp. 10–11). These institutional arrangements can be observed at multiple levels of aggregation. They include relative perspectives of micro-level institutions of individuals, groups, and firms; meso-level institutions, such as those associated with professions, markets, or industries; and macro-level societal institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012; Vargo and Lusch 2016). In the following subsection, we expound on the systemic exchange of specialized knowledge and skills, which is foundational to S-D logic.

Subsystems and Increasing Specialization

Simon (1996) notes that dynamic social systems, such as the ecosystems in which actors exchange service, often are composed of interdependent subsystems. These subsystems or modules can be defined as "group[s] of elements, such as tasks, that are highly interdependent on one another, but only minimally dependent on what happens in other modules" (Baldwin and Clark 2000, p. 63). As we have stated, the specialized knowledge and abilities required for value creation often come from a variety of other actors or groups of actors (i.e., relatively independent subsystems). In such subsystems, actors—whether they are individuals, teams, firms, and so on—work on a limited number of tasks that are part of a larger task system in which actors exchange resources and cocreate value. These subsystems permit actors to mitigate some of the restrictions of their limited cognitive abilities. That is, actors usually participate in value cocreation processes without the knowledge to fully understand or perform entire sets of these processes. This specialization results in information asymmetries among exchanging actors because these actors need to possess only the knowledge required to complete their tasks and to coordinate with the tasks of others. Herein, we explain that selling enables this coordination.

Mass production and other developments designed to improve effectiveness and efficiency have, arguably, contributed to an increase in the number of subsystems of many service ecosystems by separating production and use tasks. Similarly, developments in communication and other technologies have, at least partly, resulted in growing specialization within selling and buying processes. Firms, for example, have increasingly modularized selling and buying into multiple subsystems, as exemplified by the prevalence of salesperson categorizations (e.g., inside vs. outside salespeople, hunters vs. farmers) and both selling and buying centers (i.e., multiple actors specializing in functional subareas or tasks). As a result, salespeople have become increasingly tasked with coordinating the resources and actions of various actors across their firm, buyers' firms, and other actors (e.g., third-party solution providers, regulatory bodies). In the following subsection, we discuss the coordination of resources among subsystems by introducing the concept of crossing points.

Crossing Points and Aligned Institutional Arrangements for Service Exchange

Baldwin (2008) refers to locations where transfers of material, energy, and information between two subsystems occur, such as the one between a service provider and a service beneficiary, as a "crossing point." Thus, using the lexicon of S-D logic, a crossing point can be viewed as the location at which service can be exchanged for service. Baldwin indicates that crossing points can be "thin" or "thick." Thin crossing points permit exchange through shallow and simple interactions, whereas thick crossing points require actors to develop deep and complex interactions to exchange with one another (Baldwin and Clark 2000).

In highly institutionalized markets, for example, many crossing points are relatively thin because of established regulations, laws, relational and formal contracts, conventions, and shared meanings, which keep transaction costs relatively low (North 1990). For such thin crossing points to form, exchanging actors must align on "common ground design rules" (Baldwin and Clark 2000). These rules consist of the mutual definition of what is being reciprocally exchanged and the norms and representations that guide exchange practices (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006).

Thick crossing points, in contrast, such as those associated with discontinuous solutions and newly forming markets, lack many of these common ground design rules. Consequently, when crossing points are thick, exchange may be prevented or require the formation of deeper and more complex interactions, such as the formation of new relational contracts (North 1990). Consider, for example, self-driving cars. Before self-driving cars can be efficiently exchanged, meanings and perceptions regarding these cars (e.g., safety, legality) and exchange practices (e.g., ownership vs. on-demand ordering) must become mutually aligned, which requires deeper, costlier, and more complex actor involvement.

Aligned Institutional Arrangements for Service Exchange

The formation of common ground design rules can be viewed as the emergence, stabilization, and destruction of predominant meanings and uses of resources through institutionalization (see also Pinch and Bijker 1984). Viewed from a service ecosystems perspective, common ground design rules can be conceptualized as the aligned institutional arrangements for service exchange that guide the meanings of resources and their integration practices. These aligned institutional arrangements facilitate service exchange and often make it less costly for actors to exchange.

Consider, as an example, the early sales strategy of Salesforce.com, with its software as a service (SaaS) solution. In 1999, when Salesforce was founded, client-server software solutions, which stored data behind company firewalls and were often only accessible on company sites, dominated the customer relationship management (CRM) industry. Salesforce's SaaS solution, in contrast, stored the customer and prospect data, as well as the underlying CRM software, in the cloud. This offered great benefits to users with regard to accessibility, scalability, flexibility, and cost. However, storing proprietary customer information in the cloud was deeply incompatible with existing institutional arrangements regarding data security of a broad set of actors, such as users, managers, information technology (IT) professionals, and other industry experts.

This example highlights that service exchange often requires complex descriptions, information exchange, negotiations, trust, and unconscious cultural-cognitive alignments of service expectations among many actors. Arguably, service-for-service exchange can only be understood by observing institutional elements, such as laws and regulations, written or oral contracts, relational norms, perceptions of solutions, and shared conceptions of acceptable business practices, in combination. It is therefore necessary to view selling and institutional alignment holistically, instead of only addressing institutions in somewhat disparate subcategories. Such a holistic perspective can highlight situations in which ruptures within and among the institutional elements create opportunities for change (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). Similarly, a holistic perspective can expose situations in which aligned institutional arrangements create lock-ins and path dependencies that can suppress the selling efforts of actors aiming to bring about new solutions. That is, as we explain next, aligning institutional arrangements for service exchange (i.e., the thinning of crossing points) can simultaneously thicken the crossing points for competing solutions.

A holistic service ecosystems perspective helps connect and extend the existing sales literature's implicit and piecemealed focus on institutions by providing a more robust and encompassing perspective through which to examine selling efforts. While the sales literature has begun to emphasize the roles of salespeople in cooperating with many actors, both internal and external to the selling firm (Bolander et al. 2015; Plouffe et al. 2016), it often underemphasizes broader and more indirect processes through which systemic actors collectively influence aligned institutional arrangements for service exchange. This is problematic because, as we have stated, resources used in value creation practices are typically sourced, directly and indirectly, from many private, public, and market-facing sources. Most of these practices require a multitude of resources and, consequently, a multitude of thin crossing points.

The Salesforce example helps clarify this idea. Salesforce recognized early that a widespread shift from a client-server to a SaaS solution could only be achieved by the thinning of multiple crossing points among a broad range of actors. Implementing a CRM solution requires expertise from users, IT professionals, vendors, finance and accounting personnel, external implementation consultants, management, and many other actors. Consequently, Salesforce employees directed their selling efforts toward multiple actor groups including customers, prospects, journalists, bloggers, and internal employees, because all these actors were involved in the alignment of the institutional arrangements required for service exchange.

Furthermore, recognizing the importance of nonadopters in institutional developments, Salesforce spent time with large enterprises—prospects that they were not initially able to serve—to learn what additional functionality would be required to make them consider the SaaS solution. That is, Salesforce recognized the importance of nonusers in institutional alignments. As Benioff and Adler (2009) state, Salesforce might have discovered some of the needs of large enterprises on its own, but, without this dialog, they would not have learned the context in which perceptions of needs were formed.

In summary, the service ecosystems perspective highlights that systemic actors create mutual value through service exchange, guided by shared institutional arrangements. This perspective can aid the convergence of the sales literature on a truly systemic and institutional view by highlighting the need to zoom out beyond the buyer–seller dyad to a view that includes a broad range of systemic actors who all participate in the shaping of value cocreation practices. This broader view does not diminish the importance of understanding the buyer–seller dyad; rather, it highlights that fully understanding value cocreation practices requires looking at the involved institutional elements from different levels of aggregation because dyads are always embedded in broader social systems (Chandler and Vargo 2011). In the next section, we briefly discuss institutional work in service ecosystems—that is, the creation, maintenance, or disruption of institutions—before we offer a more transcending definition of selling.

Institutional Work in Service Ecosystems: A New Framework for Selling

Multiple strands of institutional literature have made substantial progress in explaining the tension between agency (i.e., the capacity of actors to make choices independent of the influence of structure) and structure (i.e., the extent to which institutional arrangements determine the thoughts and behaviors of actors) with regard to institutional change. The tension between agency and structure is essential in the context of selling because this tension is foundational to understanding whether, and to what extent, an actor can influence the institutional arrangements that shape perceptions of problems and the resource-integration practices that serve as solutions.

DiMaggio (1988), an institutional theorist who emphasized the agency of actors, introduced the concept of the "institutional entrepreneur," which refers to an actor who initiates changes that contribute to creating new or transforming existing institutional arrangements. It is tempting to view salespeople and other selling actors as institutional entrepreneurs because creating new and transforming existing institutional arrangements closely aligns with traditional views of salespeople (i.e., persuading buyers to enact desired exchange practices). Dixon and Tanner (2012), for example, indicate that "salespeople today must see their role as the architect for change in their customers' worlds" and that "salespeople add value when they can challenge the existing paradigms and provide a better decision-making process than the one used currently by a customer" (p. 12). Similarly, Dixon and Adamson (2011) encourage salespeople to challenge the ways buyers think (i.e., change their institutional arrangements).

More recent institutional literature, however, has emphasized that actor involvement in change processes is always broad and systemic. That is, this literature provides a more balanced view of agency and structure. Influenced by seminal work on practice theory (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; DiMaggio 1988; Giddens 1984; Oliver 1991), Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) illustrate how institutional change results from the activities of various interconnected actors as they repair and conceal tensions and conflicts—while also reinforcing similarities—in their existing institutional arrangements. Thus, as Zietsma and McKnight (2009) elucidate, institutional change always involves multiple actors who, iteratively and nonlinearly, bring about (imperfect) alignments in their institutional arrangements. This implies that, at least singly, selling actors' behaviors may not be as influential in changing the institutional arrangements of buying actors, such as the enactment of new value cocreation practices, as much of the sales literature suggests.

Furthermore, selling actors need to be viewed as engaging in not only the change and disruption of institutional arrangements but also their maintenance. "Institutional work," as Creed, DeJordy, and Lok (2010, p. 1337) point out, is not "aimed at either the creation, maintenance, or disruption of institutions but can paradoxically involve more than one of these categories at the same time." Even the most transformative change is institutionally embedded and, therefore, relies on existing resources and skills (Giddens 1984; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). The innovative SaaS solution, for example, maintained many of the institutions associated with client-server-based CRM software. Foundational to all CRM solutions, for example, is the need to store and manage customer and prospect information in one central location to help firms improve interactions, gain access to information, and automate selling and marketing activities.

Viewing Selling from an Institutional and Relational Perspective

We have highlighted that value unfolds over time through the integration of resources in a social context (i.e., relationships and institutions). Thus, aligned institutional arrangements for service exchange are not limited to expectations for discrete exchange events. Rather, they represent the outcomes of systemic institutionalization processes that guide how resources are perceived and integrated over time. However, institutional alignments are always imperfect and temporary because the nested nature of institutional arrangements results in continual incompatibilities. That is, these alignments often result in frictions within and among institutional arrangements that span regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements. As Scott (2013) notes, these incompatibilities and frictions often provide the conditions for institutional change.

Selling is often defined as a paid, promotional, interactive, and personal approach involving clearly defined buyer and seller roles. Citing changes to markets and sales processes as reasons why a new definition of selling is needed, Dixon and Tanner (2012) redefine selling as "the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context" (p. 10). While this broader definition is an important step in the right direction, it does not clearly identify the mechanisms and benefits of this interaction. That is, the efficiency of exchange and value cocreation among actors is positively shaped by aligned institutional arrangements and mutually beneficial relationships. Therefore, we define selling as the interaction between actors aimed at creating and maintaining thin crossing points—the locations at which service can be efficiently exchanged for service—through the ongoing alignment of institutional arrangements and the optimization of relationships.

This definition accentuates how institutional alignment processes are characterized by the "ongoing negotiations, experimentation, competition, and learning" (Zietsma and McKnight 2009, p. 145) of systemic actors. This dynamic is illustrated by the broad involvement of many actors (e.g., customers, prospects, media and IT consultants) in the institutionalization of the Salesforce solution. Because institutional alignments are always imperfect and temporary, these alignment processes can range from resolving complex institutional discrepancies (e.g., a novel value proposition), to "nearly invisible and often mundane … day-to-day adjustments, adaptations, and compromises" (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009, p. 1) of routinized selling processes (e.g., a reorder). Next, we further clarify the broad involvement of actors in selling activities. Then, we explicate how individual actors participate in systemic selling processes and how context influences whether an actor should be considered a selling actor. This enables us to distinguish between selling and nonselling actors and activities.

Selling and the Thinning and Thickening of Crossing Points

While it is tempting to view selling as a micro-level process in which dyads of buying and selling actors are engaged in the thinning of crossing points (i.e., aligning institutional arrangements for service exchange), selling can only be fully understood by oscillating foci among micro, meso, and macro perspectives (to capture the influence of societal intellectual property rights, industry standards, etc.; see also Chandler and Vargo 2011). Therefore, a service ecosystems perspective highlights the importance of zooming out to a meso-level view because this is the level where many thick crossing points become salient. While thick crossing points can be observed at all levels of aggregation, such as the distrust between two actors (i.e., micro level) or the use of child labor (i.e., societal level), the Salesforce example illustrates the importance of the meso-level perspective to selling.

Consider, for example, the once-perceived need to store data behind company firewalls. This perceived need created a thick crossing point that was based on aligned expectations of a broad set of actors (e.g., users, managers, IT personnel, enterprise software providers) in the software industry. Salesforce was unable to thin this crossing point by establishing relational contracts with customers alone. Rather, it, among other things, had to foster communication with broad sets of actors regarding the security and benefits of a cloud-based solution. As the SaaS solution became institutionalized, systemic actors not only learned to trust software that stored sensitive customer data in the cloud but came to expect other CRM solutions to be easily accessible, scalable, and flexible. Thus, the client-server-based solutions of Salesforce's competitors then faced thick crossing points that motivated or even forced them to adopt SaaS solutions (i.e., adapt to new institutional arrangements for service exchange).

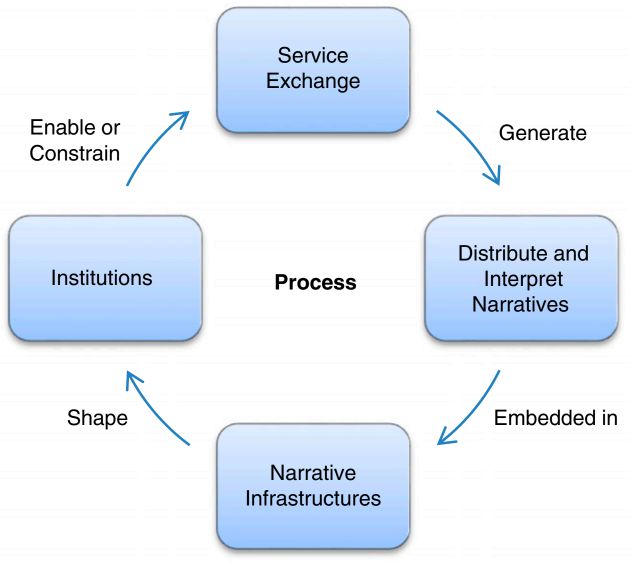
That is, thick crossing points for competing solutions, viewed from a meso level, often form on the basis of disruptions and changes to existing expectations for service exchange among broader sets of actors such as professions (e.g., IT professionals), industry experts (e.g., journalists), and market actors (e.g., vendors, customers) and their relational and formal contracts. Stated differently, the thinning of crossing points that occurs as an emerging solution is institutionalized commonly results in the thickening of others, which can lead to a previous solution being perceived as flawed or insufficient. Therefore, individual service-for-service exchange behavior "does not make sense independent of meso-level structural influences" (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, p. 18) and even broader societal norms and rules.

Importantly, a service ecosystems perspective, with its institutional levels of aggregation, highlights the multitiered nature of sales objectives. Sellers often aim to create thin crossing points that allow for exchange between two actors (e.g., between buyers and sellers). However, because these thin crossing points are not independent of meso-level structures, selling actors also have to legitimize their solutions (i.e., create thin crossing points for their solution) among meso-level sets of actors such as professions, industries, and other market actors. For example, as Benioff and Adler (2009, p. 95) indicate, "Winning huge customers, such as Dell and Japan Post, was game changing" for Salesforce not only because of revenue and profit but because such wins shape perceptions of the desirability and appropriateness of a SaaS solution among large sets of actors. Similarly, selling actors often try to block the legitimacy of competing solutions (i.e., aim to create thick crossing points for these solutions). Only with thick crossing points for competing solutions can a solution gain a perception of uniqueness and superiority and avoid the perils of commoditization.

Narratives as Mechanisms for Institutionalization

The involvement of a broad range of systemic actors in institutional work raises the question of how individual selling actors participate in the shaping of institutional arrangements that enable and constrain value cocreation practices through service exchange. To answer this question, we adapt Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy's (2004) discursive framework of institutionalization (see Figure 2), which depicts narratives as mechanisms for institutional work and, more specifically, explicates relationships among narratives, institutions, and actions. This

FIGURE 2
Service Ecosystems Perspective of Selling



Notes: This figure is adapted from Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004).

framework demonstrates how individual actors (e.g., salespeople) participate in the alignment and maintenance of institutional arrangements for service exchange without overstating the impact of these actors.

As Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004) point out, many actions produce narratives, and these narratives can have a variety of forms. Czarniawska (2004) describes narratives as written, spoken, or symbolic accounts that offer interpretation, explanation, or meaning to an individual event or action (or to a series of events or actions). Actors engage in service-for-service exchange to combine their resources with those of other actors and, in this process, propose value propositions. The offering of such value propositions leads to the generation of narratives through written (e.g., emails, brochures), spoken (e.g., sales presentations) or symbolic (e.g., diagrams, models and pictures) means, which, when distributed and interpreted, influence institutionalization processes (Taylor and Van Every 1999).

Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004) argue for sense making and legitimization as the theoretical underpinnings of these distribution and interpretation processes. Similarly, Snow (2008) suggests that narratives enable and constrain meaning construction because meaning making progresses throughout discussion and debate about germane issues, events, and topics of interest. These distribution and interpretation processes are also the venues through which the legitimacy associated with an action can be gained, maintained, or repaired (Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy 2004). Two of the earliest tasks for Salesforce, for example, were to explain cloud computing (i.e., to facilitate sense making) and to resolve data security concerns (i.e., to gain legitimacy).

For narratives to shape institutional arrangements and enable and constrain value cocreation practices, they must become embedded in broader discourses to achieve generalized meanings. That is, narratives interact (Boje 1991) and form narrative infrastructures—cocreated narratives that "emerge from a process in which fragments of different micro and macro narratives get layered on top of each other" (Seidl and Whittington 2014, p. 5)—that aid sense making and legitimization. Rosa et al. (1999), for example, suggest that narratives "are critical sensemaking tools" (p. 68) for the formation of exchange and markets.

Deuten and Rip (2000) highlight that in social systems, there is no single author and no master text being written but, rather, that multiple stories (i.e., narratives) come into alignment to form narrative infrastructures. According to these scholars, these infrastructures can be seen "as the 'rails' along which multi-actor and multi-level processes gain thrust and direction" (p. 74). Only these combined narrative infrastructures can craft coherence among social actors and mobilize support for particular practices (Araujo and Easton 2012). That is, only combined narrative infrastructures can lead to the shaping of institutional arrangements.

Salesforce, for example, recognizing the importance of broader narrative developments, treated journalists as company friends and maintained a list of approximately two dozen highly influential journalists. These journalists received increased bilateral contact and access to executives and were often informed directly of company and industry developments. Salesforce used these relationships to gain access to information and to influence the narratives that these journalists published. This way, Salesforce was able to convey narratives to journalists that framed the SaaS solution positively. In addition to calling attention to Salesforce, such publicity played an important role in aligning narratives and facilitating institutionalization across the service ecosystem because "unbiased references by experts carry tremendous power" (Benioff and Adler 2009, p. 44). Salesforce also facilitated the distribution and interpretation of narratives and the formation and alignment of narrative infrastructures by providing online platforms which opened dialogue and aided the resource integration practices of many stakeholders.

We, therefore, propose that understanding selling requires accounting not only for the narrative alignments of buyers and sellers but also for the dialogical processes that enable broad sets of actors to learn together (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). The notion of dialogical interaction further clarifies our definition of selling. Our definition excludes unidirectional forms of communication such as advertising because such forms lack interactional components. It also excludes interactions that solely rely on existing institutions and do not result in any adjustments, adaptations, and compromises between and among actors. Thus, we do not consider activities purely focused on order fulfillment as selling if such activities fail to contribute to sense making, legitimization, and the optimization of relationships. However, it is important to point out that fulfillment quality often affects relationship quality (e.g., trust) and can support or hinder selling outcomes. Building on the definition proposed by Dixon and Tanner (2012), the definition we advance recognizes that many actors are involved in selling, that selling can include many forms of interactions, and that selling is contextual. Next, before discussing some of the implications that a service ecosystems perspective offers to practitioners and academics, we discuss the distinctions between salespeople and other selling actors.

Who Engages in Selling? Distinguishing Salespeople and Other Selling Actors

The path dependency from dyadic views that frame value as something created by producers and consumed by users led to clear and persisting distinctions between the roles and functions of sellers and buyers (i.e., salespeople facilitate the delivery of value to buyers). However, as we have stated, the sales literature is beginning to recognize that value is cocreated among systemic actors and to accentuate the importance of salespeople in establishing information exchange, flexibility, and solidarity. This highlights that selling is not only performed by dedicated sales personnel but also by buyers and a broad range of other actors. When exchanging service, for example, flexibility, solidarity, and information exchange is generally as important to the procuring side as it is to the selling side. More broadly, all actors participate in the shaping of value cocreation practices by creating, maintaining, and disrupting the institutions that enable and constrain these practices. Therefore, a systemic view on value creation supports a move away from predesignated roles of firms/customers and sellers/buyers to more generic actors—that is, to an actor-to-actor orientation (Vargo and Lusch 2011).

To make this point clearer, consider the following. A salesperson can engage in institutional maintenance by promoting the benefits of a current solution to buyers, but so too can a procurement specialist by rejecting a meeting with a sales engineer who wants to introduce a novel solution to a problem or by emphasizing why a current solution will be sustained. Furthermore, an actor external to the selling or buying firm, such as an expert, may engage in institutional maintenance by speaking of the benefits of an accepted solution. Likewise, when a new solution is proposed, actors employed by the procuring firm (e.g., procurement officers, users, executives) often engage in internal and external selling to influence the institutional arrangements of other stakeholders (e.g., operations, industry partners).

Recognizing the important roles of users, for example, Salesforce went beyond the norm of incorporating customer testimonials into marketing materials and emphasized connecting customers to prospects, media sources, analysts, partners, and others at prospect-gathering events. Salesforce chief executive officer Marc Benioff describes how often at these events, "without prompting from us, customers would stand up and deliver spontaneous testimony professing their belief in our product." (Benioff and Adler 2009, p. 50). In this way, many customers became Salesforce evangelists whose testimonials, in the words of Benioff and Adler (2009), "made them the best marketing and sales team an organization could have" (p. 51). This anecdotal evidence supports Kumar, Petersen, and Leone's (2013) findings that references greatly influence firms in making purchase decisions as well as Helm and Salminen's (2010) claim that a customer reference can, at times, be more valuable than a customer's transaction.

Thus, what we refer to as selling cannot be confined to certain actor roles because many actors are often involved in the creation and maintenance of crossing points. This actor-to-actor orientation highlights how a broad set of actors, regardless of the term chosen to characterize them (e.g., sellers, buyers), engage in selling and, thus, are selling actors. This reconciles the conflicting definitions of salespeople prevalent across sales textbooks and practitioner-oriented books, articles, and other literature that have often argued that context (whether one offers a good or service in exchange for payment) dictates whether someone is a salesperson.

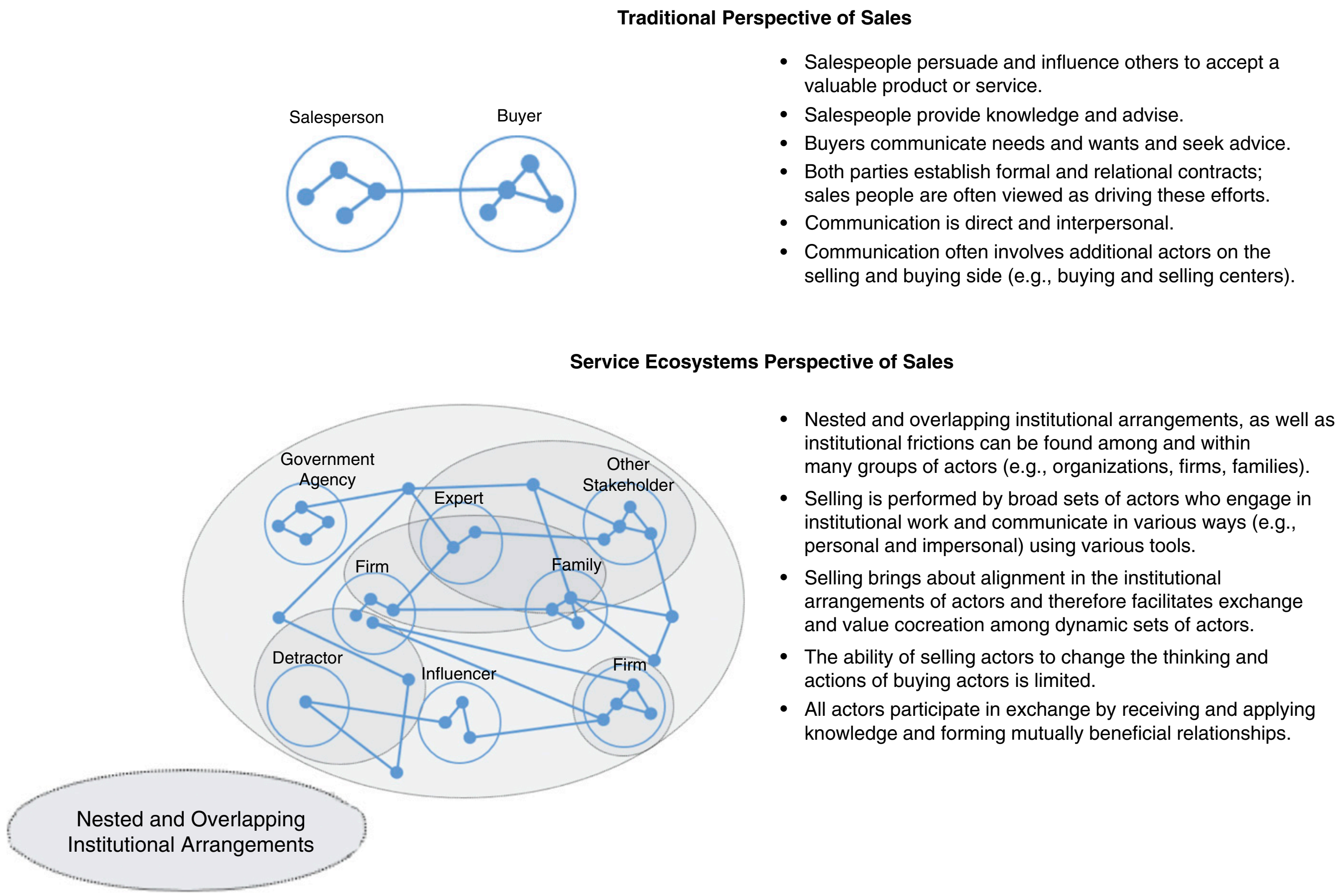
Additional Discussion

The introduced service ecosystems perspective illuminates, among other points, the need to reevaluate the conceptual underpinnings of selling and the sales role (for a comparison of key differences between a traditional and a service ecosystems perspective of sales, see Figure 3). As such, this research, which can be classified as a "revising" conceptual contribution (MacInnis 2011, p. 144), informs the literature by "suggesting that what is seen, known, observable, or of importance can be seen differently or by suggesting that what matters a great deal matters for a different reason than what was previously believed." A service ecosystems perspective offers a novel lens through which to view selling, one through which selling actors are viewed as playing fundamental roles in aligning institutional arrangements and optimizing relationships for service exchange among interdependent actors. MacInnis (2011, p. 138) claims that revising conceptual contributions should be evaluated by their abilities to "identify why revision is necessary; reveal the advantages of the revised view and what novel insights it generates; maintain parsimony." As we have articulated and expand on subsequently, a service ecosystems perspective offers a number of advantages and novel insights.

To more adequately understand selling as well as the relationships between wider sets of selling actors, broader study of the many crossing points that need to be thinned to facilitate resource integration and value cocreation must be undertaken. That is, as the Salesforce example indicates, it is the thinning of many interconnected crossing points that leads to value cocreation. The institutionalization of the SaaS solution, for instance, began years before this solution was ever envisioned. Though fundamentally novel in the way data were accessed and stored, this solution heavily relied on many institutional arrangements that were formed through the institutionalization of client-server-based CRM tools. As we have stated, at their core, all CRM solutions are based on the belief that storing customer and prospect information in one central location can provide efficiencies and automation for many sales and marketing activities.

Similarly, the increasing proliferation of the Internet, mobile connectivity, and the emergence of other cloud-based solutions undoubtedly shaped both the perceptions of problems that the SaaS solution aimed to address as well as perceptions of legitimate solutions to these problems. That is, the SaaS solution became successful because selling resulted in aligned institutional arrangements for service exchange over time and across many crossing points. The same institutionalization processes also occur for solutions that change more incrementally. However, these incremental processes may be

FIGURE 3
Contrasting a Service Ecosystems Perspective on Sales



masked by the fact that a large degree of institutional alignment and selling efforts have already occurred.

It is important to point out that the service ecosystems perspective does not diminish the contributions of the existing sales literature; rather, this holistic perspective reconciles and builds on many of these contributions. Consistent with dyadic perspectives, Salesforce was able to form strong relationships with customers, industry experts, and journalists. For example, many would argue that the company excelled in prospecting by targeting end users rather than following the industry norm of targeting executives. The meeting and travel practices of end users often resulted in institutional frictions with client-server solutions and their restrictive data accessibility. After a successful trial, end users often lobbied their managers to try the SaaS solution (e.g., they engaged in selling, the thinning of crossing points).

The service ecosystems perspective can also inform the debate regarding whether the importance of salespeople is increasing or decreasing due to changes in markets. As we have stated, whereas some theoreticians and practitioners believe that market changes will diminish the power and strategic importance of salespeople, others predict that salespeople will become more important (Hunter and Perreault 2007, p. 16). Sheth and Sharma (2008), taking a balanced view, note "a shift towards interactivity, connectivity, and ongoing relationships," which, along with the "enhanced use of technology[,] will reduce some traditional sales functions" but "will also lead to changes in the … role of [the] salesperson [to be] more [like] that of a general manager … responsible for marshaling internal and external resources to satisfy customer needs and wants" (p. 260).

A service ecosystems perspective reveals that neither the importance of selling nor the nature of markets are fundamentally changing. What might be changing, as evidenced by the changes in the tasks salespeople perform, are the numbers of crossing points that need to be aligned and the technologies with which actors can engage in institutional alignment processes. Norman (2011), for example, showcases how even tools designed to be simple generally make the world more complex as they tend to increase the number of connections among actors and subsystems. However, despite this increase in complexity, systemic and institutional alignments have always been at the heart of selling. Thus, we argue that selling must always be viewed through a systemic lens and that the debate about whether changes in modern markets influence the importance of salespeople is focused on the wrong question.

What is driving the discussion about whether the importance of salespeople is changing is not a transition to complex markets, because markets have always been complex, but rather a change in the ways narrative infrastructures are formed (i.e., the ways market actors align their expectations for service exchange). Technological advancements, such as the Internet, are making it easier for a larger number of actors to engage in selling. Consider retail sales, for example. Instead of relying on the advice of salespeople when making a purchase, many buying actors now consult online reviews to evaluate products and services. Thus, the institutional alignment work in which salespeople were traditionally involved is now often performed (arguably more convincingly and conveniently) by numerous selling actors, including those who describe products or services and how they fit into the contexts in which they are used.

This, however, does not represent a shift in the importance of selling but rather a shift in who performs selling and where selling is performed. Selling has been and continues to be important regardless of market complexity. However, advanced communication tools, such as the Internet, highlight and facilitate broader participation of systemic actors in institutionalization, legitimization, and sense making. Consequently, while selling will continue to be an important element of value creation, it may be performed by even broader sets of selling actors who are not traditionally categorized as salespeople.

Implications

This article offers several implications for practice and theory. For practitioners, we highlight implications for gaining new business, maintaining existing business, and managing intrafirm actors along with broad sets of external selling actors. For theoreticians, we propose a research agenda involving additional inquiry into sales performance, analytical approaches, and salespeople characterizations.

Implication for Practice

Gaining business with new solutions. Many traditional sales perspectives begin with a new product or service and end with persuading customers to adopt it. However, a service ecosystems perspective shows that institutionalization processes, and thus selling processes, precede product or service developments. The Salesforce selling process did not begin with the launch of its SaaS solution, nor will it end when the last license is sold. Instead, this selling process was, and remains, embedded in broader institutionalization processes in which many systemic actors collectively form aligned institutions for service exchange. These alignments always include the institutionalization of complementary innovations and downstream adoptions (Adner 2006).

Thus, a service ecosystems perspective highlights that selling considerations need to be an important part of new product and service strategies. A new solution that fits well into established resource integration practices (e.g., an established market with thin crossing points) requires less selling effort. However, these thinned crossing points also make it more difficult for selling actors to facilitate the creation of thick crossing points for competing solutions because competing solutions in such markets, by definition, are perceived to be quite similar. A new solution facing thick crossing points, in contrast, requires the negotiation of institutional resistance and change. This dynamic makes such a discontinuous solution riskier (i.e., the solution might not gain legitimacy) and may both prolong and complicate the required selling efforts. However, when a discontinuous solution is successfully institutionalized, it may, at least in the short term, make it easier to facilitate the maintenance of thick crossing points for competing solutions. This at least partially explains the challenges Salesforce initially had to overcome with the SaaS solution, why Salesforce has had great success to date, and why Salesforce's competitors were forced to also adopt SaaS solutions.

Maintaining business. A service ecosystems perspective on selling also has implications for maintaining existing business. To maintain business, selling actors need to understand the institutions and resource integration practices that have led buying actors to use their solutions. By doing so, selling actors can better understand how and why the solution they offer fits with buyers' resource integration practices, and they can make adjustments as institutional incompatibilities and frictions arise.

If a competing actor proposes a superior solution, it may be disadvantageous for the selling actor to try to prevent the institutionalization of this solution. By seeking to prevent institutionalization that would result in greater value for the buyer, the selling actor may violate relational contracts, leading to diminished relationship quality with the buyer or even to relationship dissolution. Arguably, it is often more important to develop and maintain a relational contract between a selling actor and buyer than it is to persuade the buyer to adopt or extend their use of an inferior solution. This is because the buyer–seller relationship and its quality play a large role in allowing selling actors to discover institutional incompatibilities and frictions that they and their firms can alleviate through new solutions.

Expanding the view from buyer–seller dyads. As shown in Figure 3, consistent with thought on multistage marketing (Kleinaltenkamp and Ehret 2006), selling actors must ensure that the narratives of a broad range of stakeholders are distributed and interpreted. Although selling actors play pivotal roles in aligning narratives to form narrative infrastructures, selling actors can never become the master storytellers. Many firms are already recognizing the need for broader alignment processes among actors from various functions and organizations as well as external actors throughout the service ecosystem. For example, selling actors often utilize user testimonials and case studies to facilitate institutional alignment across actors in prospect firms. Furthermore, team selling often involves actors from various functions in the selling firm, and buying centers often consist of members from multiple functions. However, selling actors often lack access to potential users and to other stakeholders, creating multistage and indirect relationships (Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, and Wilson 2016). Arguably, too many firms still view selling as something that their employees need to be shielded from rather than an opportunity for collaborative innovation, as is evidenced by the prevalence of "gatekeepers" and policies limiting "backdoor selling."

Broadening the set of employees trained in selling. Because selling is not confined to certain actor roles, many actors, regardless of the title used to characterize them, play important roles in aligning expectations of service exchange. Therefore, firms need to reassess which positions need sales expertise either through training or through hiring already-trained employees. For example, procurement managers often actively align expectations for service exchange with new suppliers and coworkers, which may result in lower-priced and/or customized offerings. In addition, selling actors should be trained in how to foster and participate in true dialogical interactions among large sets of actors.

Adopting a broader, longitudinal, and balanced view on sales performance. As we have stated, a service ecosystems perspective on selling highlights that institutional work is an ongoing process requiring long-term relational contracts among actors. Often, these institutionalization processes are more important than the revenue and profit of a transaction or history of transactions with a buyer. This importance is easy to overlook because the outcomes of institutionalization processes often only become salient after extended periods of time and are reflected in the behaviors of many actors. Therefore, performance evaluations need to encompass the outcomes of institutionalization processes in which selling actors, both internal and external to firms, participate. Consequently, limiting selling actor evaluations to actors employed by a firm and evaluating these employees using only short-term sales goals (e.g., monthly or quarterly quotas) obscures the cause–effect relationships between selling actors' behaviors and desired outcomes. For example, overemphasizing short-term sales goals may result in salesperson behaviors (e.g., "hard selling") that increase their short-term performance at the expense of their long-term performance due to relationship and reputational damages.

Broadening information technology to connect actors and narratives. The participation of broad sets of internal and external actors in dialogical interactions and institutional processes highlights the importance of selling actors developing tools and processes to systematically integrate and manage communication flows among these sets of actors, many of whom are not customers or prospects. As we have described, selling-related narratives are not limited to interpersonal interactions but comprise many forms of communications (e.g., online product reviews, conference presentations, social media posts). Therefore, firms should broaden their information technology (e.g., CRM, social media analytics) to track a broad range of selling actors and to develop strategies to assess the influence, opinions, and recommendations of these actors. In line with this assessment, firms should develop contact and communication strategies not only for customers and prospects but for all actors relevant to selling efforts.

Although external actors cannot be managed in the traditional sense, supportive actors can be encouraged to voice their thoughts and can be given platforms to amplify their narratives. Examples of how firms may do so include invitations to attend important events (e.g., industry conferences), arranged interactions with journalists and industry experts, and promotional materials featuring firms and their products and solutions, among others. Opposing actors can also often be influenced to change or lessen their narrative contributions to support a desired narrative infrastructure. For example, firms can actively aim to build relationships (e.g., seek feedback) and can then use the resulting knowledge to understand and address concerns.

Implications for Research

Conceptualizing and evaluating salesperson performance. As we have discussed, a service ecosystem perspective calls for increased scrutiny regarding how sales performance is conceptualized and evaluated. Sales-focused articles in marketing's top journals, much like salesperson evaluation systems, are replete with objective performance measures frequently limited to the number, revenue, or profit of salesperson transactions as well as buyer satisfaction. However, Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal (2011) note that "the sales performance construct is becoming increasingly complex," and that there is a need to address "what constitutes sales performance in today's economy" (p. 425). A service ecosystem perspective accentuates that the conceptualization and examination of salesperson performance needs to encompass the outcomes of the institutionalization in which salespeople participate. In this context, it is important to point out that some institutional elements might be more difficult to change than others. Lock-ins created by laws, for example, might be harder to change than the value perception of a modified solution.

> RP_1: How can the participation of selling actors in bringing about aligned institutional arrangements for service exchange be evaluated? What are the appropriate metrics? What are the appropriate time horizons for evaluating institutional salesperson performance? How can the degree and type (in terms of the three elements) of institutional misalignments of a new solution (i.e., the degree of newness or legitimacy) in these evaluations be accounted for?

The evolving nature of tasks performed by selling actors and the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to perform these tasks. The service ecosystem perspective highlights an increasing number of crossing points and changing ways through which narratives are formed and distributed in modern markets. Thus, additional examination of the tasks selling actors perform and the KSAs required is needed. In addition to traditional selling tasks, modern salespeople are increasingly being asked to provide customer service (Rapp et al. 2017), act as general managers (Sheth and Sharma 2008), and perform tasks traditionally reserved for business development (e.g., develop and manage strategic partnerships, access and align broad sets of cross-functional and intraorganizational actors and resources, manage projects). Thus, a service ecosystems perspective highlights the need for additional and broader KSAs that enable selling actors to better synthesize information and manage interactions with diverse actors and their resources.

Furthermore, technological advancements such as social media platforms, CRM and productivity tools, and selling–buying firm interfaces are affording salespeople both greater and easier access to buyers and their needs, potential solutions, and competitor developments. These changes suggest that salespeople will increasingly use advanced communication and analytical technologies to facilitate the alignment of narratives. Given these developments, it is likely that salespeople will continue to serve as major differentiators among firms. However, the means through which salespeople and other selling actors contribute to this differentiation may change as technologies evolve and the numbers of crossing points increase. Although salespeople have been, and will continue to be, important in the alignment of institutional arrangements for service exchange, some of the tasks salespeople perform and the requisite KSAs may change.

> RP_2: What selling actor and salesperson-performed tasks and KSAs will change in importance, emerge, or disappear as communication and analytical technologies evolve and the numbers of crossing points increase? What selling actor– and salesperson-performed tasks and KSAs will differentiate firms as communication and analytical technologies evolve and the numbers of crossing points increase?

Analytical approaches consistent with a service ecosystems perspective. This article underscores the importance of investigating outcomes of interest using approaches that account for the interplays of many actors and dynamic change. Brass and Krackhardt (1999) point out that social network analysis can help explain how information, trust, and other resources flow within networks of actors, as well as how "people interact and communicate to make sense of, and successfully operate in, their environment" (p. 182). Consistent with the argument that the sales-focused marketing literature is moving toward a systemic and institutional perspective, analytical techniques with systemic foundations such as social network analysis have received increasing attention (Ahearne et al. 2013; Bolander et al. 2015; Gonzalez, Claro, and Palmatier 2014). However, social network analysis has not yet been used to assess institutionalization and alignment of the narrative infrastructures of systemic actors within the sales literature.

Thus, there is great opportunity to employ social network analysis to examine measures that describe and assess maintenance and change in properties of actor location, social capital, tie strength, and brokerage, among others and the roles they play in institutionalization processes. Such research would ideally adopt an approach (e.g., dynamic network analysis) that offers the ability to analyze large-scale networks and multiple overlapping networks, as well as the examination of change at both the node (i.e., actor) and network level.

> RP_3: What analytical approaches are suited to longitudinally investigate sales-related outcomes in dynamic service ecosystems? How do network attributes influence institutionalization and narrative alignment processes in the context of selling? How should selling actors prioritize alignment needs among systemic actors?

Institutional work and the importance of various characterizations of salespeople. The connections, if any, between institutional work and the importance of various characterizations (e.g., inside or outside; "hunter or gatherer"; business to business vs. business to consumer; transactional, enterprise, and consultative sales) of salespeople warrant examination. A traditional perspective suggests that the importance of salespeople depends on how much they influence and change the behaviors and thoughts of buying actors and often neglects to recognize institutional maintenance. This contributes to common assumptions that outside salespeople, "hunters," business-to-business salespeople, and both enterprise and consultative salespeople are more important than their counterparts.

A service ecosystems perspective suggests that because of the importance of all forms of institutional work (i.e., change, maintenance, and disruption), it may be premature to conclude whether some characterizations of salespeople are more important than others. In addition to examining the ways various characterizations of salespeople engage in institutional work, further research should consider potential contingencies (e.g., industry, company characteristics, other selling actors involved in institutional work) related to this work. By doing so, future research could address whether some characterizations of salespeople are more important than others, whether this importance is contingent on specific factors, and whether changing means of communication influence this importance.

> RP_4: Do some characterizations of salespeople relate to the type of institutional work (i.e., change, maintenance, and disruption) that is dominantly performed? Are there contingencies that influence the importance of salespeople, and if so, what are they? Are changing means of communication influencing the importance of some characterizations of salespeople differently than others, and if so, how?

Conclusion

This article advances a service ecosystems perspective as a theoretical foundation for examining selling and the participation of selling actors in value cocreation. In doing so, it aids the convergence of the sales literature on a systemic perspective that recognizes the importance of institutional arrangements and relationships in service exchange. A service ecosystems perspective leads to a reconceptualization of selling in which broad sets of actors interact with the aim of creating, maintaining, and disrupting the institutions that enable and constrain value cocreation practices through service-for-service exchange. This view of selling deemphasizes the ability of any single selling actor to influence the decision making of another actor and highlights the broader involvement of systemic actors in the formation of thin and thick crossing points. Finally, a service ecosystems perspective illustrates that markets have always been complex and dynamic and that selling actors have always been, and will continue to be, important in the alignment of institutional arrangements for service exchange.

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