

Reimagining Selling in Entrepreneurship: Towards a Seller-Centric Research Agenda

Abstract

This note proposes expanding the selling research agenda beyond the dominant customer-centric paradigm to incorporate a seller-centric perspective, emphasising benefits to sellers alongside customer value. While customer-centric selling has advanced understanding of how to meet buyer needs, build trust and enhance customer outcomes, it often overlooks the equally important gains that sellers realise through the selling process. This includes skill development, resilience, identity amongst others. Drawing on research highlighting the transferable skills and benefits that sales encounters offer sellers, this note argues that recognising these seller-centric benefits enriches the conceptualisation of selling, especially in entrepreneurial contexts. By integrating seller outcomes, selling research can more comprehensively address the dual nature of sales as a relational exchange that simultaneously empowers buyers and sellers. This broader perspective invites future research to explore how seller credibility, skill acquisition and entrepreneurial advancement interrelate with customer-centric strategies, ultimately contributing to more holistic research on selling.

Keywords

Entrepreneurial Selling, Seller-centric perspective, selling-entrepreneurship nexus, practice-based entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial identity

Introduction: A personal starting point

In 2015, I started a consultancy business to help entrepreneurs enact their business ideas, scale up strategically and secure investment to build their business. An aha moment was the realisation that most of those who had previous independent selling experience seemed to progress faster along the journey. It sparked curiosity, as I reflected on my own experience as an independent seller for 13years+ prior to starting the consultancy, and I have since explored the intersections of selling and entrepreneurship. Surprisingly, this nexus is sparse in entrepreneurial literature, and though Matthews et al. (2018) bold publication was a breath of fresh air which enlightened and showcased the intersections of these two areas, selling is still largely viewed in a customer-centric manner.

This research note aims to challenge and extend this existing discourse by shifting attention from customer-centric selling to seller-centric developmental impacts on the entrepreneurial

journey. I argue that selling deserves greater emphasis within entrepreneurship, not only for its outcomes on customers but for its transformative effects on the entrepreneur. This discussion highlights how selling fosters crucial entrepreneurial skills, reinforces resilience and sharpens opportunity recognition. By situating selling within the practice turn in entrepreneurship, this note positions sales engagements as central entrepreneurial practices that shape venture development and entrepreneurial identity.

The sections that follow highlight the current selling literature and concludes with a proposal for a fresh agenda of seller-centric selling research.

The Current Selling Research Focus

Selling research as a customer-centric paradigm

Selling research is predominantly framed within a customer-centric paradigm, emphasising how firms can better understand and serve customer needs: to build trust, co-create value, and foster long-term relationships (Franke & Park, 2006; Hughes et al., 2013; Mullins et al., 2014). Research published in leading academic journals supports this view, emphasising consultative selling, collaborative innovation, and customer empowerment as critical success factors (Chang & Taylor, 2016; Ko et al., 2022; Yi & Gong, 2013). This customer-centric stance entails redefining sales success metrics to focus on customer outcomes and relationship quality rather than short-term sales targets. Consequently, approaches like the Mhaka (2025) S.A.V.E. (Solutions, Access, Value, Education) framework and service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) have shifted the focus toward tailoring solutions, enhancing customer experience and empowering buyers in complex decision processes. Mhaka's (2025) S.A.V.E model is particularly noteworthy, and while this perspective celebrates the transformation of salespeople into trusted advisors who prioritise customer outcomes above immediate transactions, this prevailing lens often overlooks a crucial consideration: how the selling process impacts on the seller.

Darr & Pinch (2013) define selling as “the act of offering goods and/or services to others in return for receiving money” (pg. 1604) and one which has a corresponding action of buying. This suggests that an individual (the seller) sells and the intended customer (the buyer) buys. As such, selling is not merely a service to the customer but a dynamic exchange impacting seller motivation, effectiveness, and enhanced confidence. Recognising these dual benefits

enriches selling research, enabling a more balanced understanding that not only focuses on customer-centricity, but views the seller as one which performs an enterprising action (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Selling and Entrepreneurship Research

Entrepreneurial selling (ES) is conceptualised as selling carried out by entrepreneurs (Lehto, 2015; Weeks & Kahle, 1990), but remains an underexplored, though fundamental, activity. Distinct from traditional professional sales, in that ES is independent and conducted with a degree of autonomy, much like the predominant selling discourse, ES emphasises how sales interactions can be optimised to engage and persuade customers, resulting in competitive advantage for the venture (Dalecki, 2019; Huang et al., 2018; Onyemah & Rivera-Pesquera, 2021). It pays limited attention to the reciprocal effects that selling has on the entrepreneur. Notably, Dalecki (2019) situates ES explicitly within the entrepreneurial context, arguing that ES is not merely a transactional activity but a context-dependent practice shaped by the unique conditions entrepreneurs face – including resource scarcity, legitimacy deficits, and the need to simultaneously build credibility while closing the sale. Dalecki's framing of ES as contextually embedded is significant: it establishes that entrepreneurs do not simply sell as professional salespeople do, but rather enact selling in ways that are inseparable from their entrepreneurial circumstances. However, while this contextualisation is valuable, it remains anchored in outcome-oriented thinking, focused on what selling achieves for the venture, rather than what the practice of selling does to the entrepreneur as a developing agent. It is this gap that the present note seeks to address.

For instance, early-stage entrepreneurs, often operating with constrained resources and limited credibility, contend with the dual challenge of selling their vision while building trust with prospective customers. Rehme & Svensson (2011) study of the first sale illustrates that achieving the first sale is not just a commercial milestone but a credibility-building process that involves leveraging founder and network relationships. They argue that the first sale encompasses phases of credibility establishment, closing, and operational delivery, underscoring the strategic and relational complexity embedded in ES. Additionally, functioning as their firm's first and sole salesperson, while lacking extensive sales infrastructure and resources, entrepreneurs contend with mastering and leveraging selling encounters. Thus, through the direct engagement that selling compels, they develop critical

skills comparable to experiential forms of entrepreneurial learning (Olorunfemi et al., 2025). These learning processes, catalysed by sales interactions, are central to success yet remain underemphasised in entrepreneurship literature.

Selling and the Entrepreneur

Engaging in selling is a critical learning process for entrepreneurs. A typical selling interaction can cultivate resilience by exposing entrepreneurs to rejection and negotiation, which are inevitable in early venture creation (Chandna & Salimath, 2018; Murillo, 2016). Selling also enhances opportunity recognition as customer feedback and sales conversations continually refine the venture's value proposition (Blocker et al., 2012; Matthews et al., 2018). Such iterative learning through direct engagement exemplifies Entrepreneurship as Practice (EaP), where capability development occurs through doing, losing and adapting (Geiger & Kelly, 2014; Keating et al., 2014). Rehme & Svensson (2011) reveal the importance of social and industrial networks in facilitating sales, suggesting selling also advances entrepreneurs' relational capital and credibility in their ecosystems. Matthews et al. (2016) provide a systematic review of ES practices, reconceptualising the literature to show that selling in entrepreneurial contexts is a multifaceted, strategically embedded activity that extends well beyond transactional exchange. Building on this, Matthews et al. (2018) offers a landmark interdisciplinary framework at the intersection of entrepreneurship and selling, establishing ES is not incidental to venture development but constitutes of it i.e. shaping opportunity recognition, network development, and strategic positioning. Crucially, however, even within this rich interdisciplinary framing, the seller's developmental trajectory (the identity formation, capability accumulation and resilience-building) that occur through the practice of selling remains an understated thread. It is precisely this thread that a seller-centric research agenda seeks to foreground.

Table 1 synthesises the literature on selling and potential entrepreneurial skills that could accrue as a result of the selling encounter, utilising the Hase & Busch (2018) conceptualisation of the selling process to link developed skills to the selling stages where they are practiced.

Insert Table 1

The case for a more Seller-centric research agenda

While customer-centric approaches such as the S.A.V.E. model (Mhaka, 2025), co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) have significantly enriched our understanding of modern selling, they have also created a dominant narrative where the seller is seen primarily as a facilitator of customer value. This view, while important, risks underrepresenting the developmental and entrepreneurial significance of selling for the seller. A seller-centric research agenda would challenge this imbalance by foregrounding the seller as an active agent whose growth, resilience, and identity are shaped through the selling process. As Sarasvathy's (2001) effectuation theory reminds us, entrepreneurial journeys unfold contingently, and selling encounters are often where entrepreneurs make do with available resources and experiment with emerging opportunities.

Alignment with Entrepreneurship-as-Practice (EaP) Perspective

Entrepreneurship-as-Practice (EaP), as defined by Thompson et al. (2020) treats entrepreneurship as constituted through the everyday situated and routinised actions of entrepreneurs, focusing on what entrepreneurs do and how they do it, rather than on the stable traits of linear processes. This EaP perspective, also referred to in the literature as the 'practice turn' in entrepreneurship foregrounds entrepreneurial action as constituted through everyday situated and materially mediated practices (Keating et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2020).

Selling is not only about creating solutions for customers but also about enacting entrepreneurship through relational and adaptive practices. Geiger & Kelly's (2014) foundational work on sales-as-practice offers a particularly resonant theoretical anchor here. Drawing explicitly on practice theory, they argue that selling should be understood, not as a set of techniques or outcomes, but as a practice that is a socially organised, routinised and materially mediated form of activity that is enacted in situ. Their sales-as-practice lens directs attention to what salespeople actually do in selling encounters: how they use scripts, tools, bodies and relationships to perform sales interactions. Transposing this lens unto the entrepreneurial context reveals a significant opportunity: *if selling is a practice, then engaging in it relatedly and reflexively, as entrepreneurs must, is necessarily a process of becoming*. Each selling encounter is not merely a revenue-generating event, but a developmental episode in

which the entrepreneur learns, adapts and evolves. Sales-as-practice thus provides the theoretical scaffolding for a seller-centric research agenda, positioning the entrepreneur-as-seller as an active, practice-constituted subject rather than a passive conduit of customer value.

The EaP perspective calls for research attention on how entrepreneurial outcomes are achieved through situated, iterative actions and engagements (Shepherd, 2015). Selling represents a quintessential enactment of this perspective, as entrepreneurs engage dynamically with customers, adapting their approaches based on real-time feedback. Through this lens, selling transcends its transactional nature to become a practice which entrepreneurs develop, refine and enact their entrepreneurial identity.

As such, I propose the progression of selling research from customer-centricity to a seller-centric perspective, leveraging the skills outlined in Table 1 as tokens that enrich the framework proposed in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that bridges customer-centric and seller-centric paradigms through the lens of EaP. The left anchor positions the seller as a facilitator of customer solutions and trusted advisor, attending to long-term relationships and customer empowerment. The right anchor foregrounds the seller's own developmental trajectory, capturing how the iterative, situated practices of selling cultivate resilience, identity formation, and entrepreneurial capability over time. Crucially, ES occupies the practice-based bridge at the centre of the framework. It is through the repeated, enacted routines of selling (i.e. prospecting, pitching, handling objections and closing) that entrepreneurs learn, adapt and grow. This EaP bridge makes explicit that the value of selling is not only the revenue it generates but also the entrepreneurial competence it produces in the seller (Olorunfemi et al., 2025).

Future Research Directions

Future entrepreneurial research could fruitfully examine the situated interactions of selling encounters, integrating notions of customer agency alongside entrepreneurial agency of the

seller. Investigations might focus on how these engagements affect venture trajectory, innovation, and ecosystem positioning. Additional research could explore how selling experiences shape the long-term identity trajectories of entrepreneurs, drawing on longitudinal methodologies that capture the cumulative developmental effects of repeated selling encounters. In particular, practice-grounded research, informed by Geiger & Kelly's (2014) sales-as-practice framework and the broader EaP perspective (Thompson et al., 2020), offers a generative methodological pathway for such enquiry. Such studies would enrich entrepreneurship scholarship by illuminating micro-level mechanisms through which selling builds entrepreneurial competence, and would advance our theoretical understanding of how practice-based learning translates into venture resilience and strategic adaptability. This agenda also invites interdisciplinary dialogue between sales research, entrepreneurship theory and identity scholarship, opening productive new avenues for empirical investigation. This agenda is summarised as a synthesis in Table 2.

Insert Table 2

Conclusion

This research note has argued for the necessity of rebalancing the prevailing focus on customer-centric selling by foregrounding the seller and their developmental journey. Selling is more than a mechanism for delivering value to customers; it is also a transformative practice that fosters resilience, improvisation and entrepreneurial learning in the seller. By situating selling research within the EaP perspective, it becomes possible to see how entrepreneurs co-create opportunities not only with customers but also through the embodied act of selling itself. This reframing highlights selling as a site of bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005), effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001) and credibility building (Rehme & Svensson, 2011), all of which are central to venture emergence and growth.

A seller-centric research agenda, therefore, holds the potential to expand entrepreneurship scholarship by illuminating how selling contributes to entrepreneurial identity formation and capability development. It also aligns with the experiential, practice-based nature of entrepreneurship and offers rich insights into venture creation, opportunity mobilisation, and entrepreneurial learning.

Such an agenda complements, rather than competes with, customer-centric frameworks, offering a more holistic understanding of the sales encounter as a dual-value creation process (Darr & Pinch, 2013). Ultimately, embracing selling as a core entrepreneurial practice which develops the seller at the heart of the activity, provides fresh insights into how entrepreneurs learn, adapt and thrive in uncertain and resource-constrained environments, thereby advancing both theory and practice in entrepreneurship and sales research.

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Figure 1: Conceptual framework of seller-centric entrepreneurial selling.

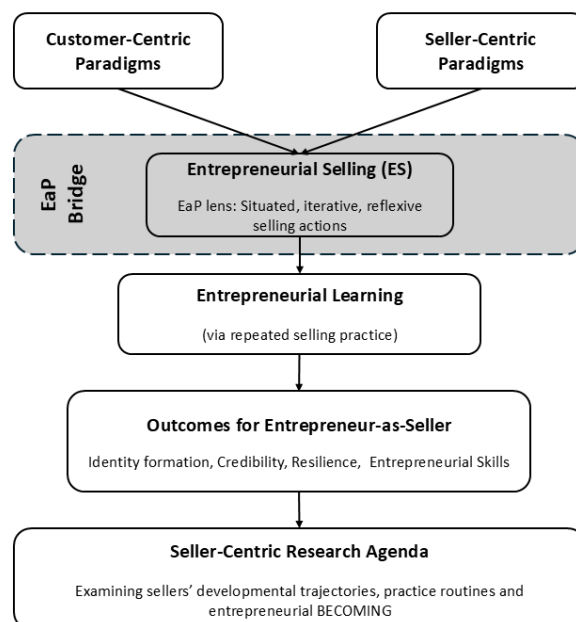


Table 1: Selling skills and potential utilisation beyond selling.

Skills acquired through Selling encounters	Utilisation during selling (Hase & Busch, 2018)	Skill utilisation and benefit beyond Selling	Entrepreneurship Implications
Active Listening (Powers et al., 2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prospecting • Handling objections • Closing 	Enables deeper understanding of client needs and improves interpersonal communication in diverse settings.	Supports opportunity recognition through attentiveness to market signals, customer pain points and unmet needs – a foundational entrepreneurial capability (Matthews et al., 2018).
Persuasion and Ethical Influence (Mullins et al., 2014; Plouffe et al., 2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting • Handling objection • Closing 	Develops abilities in negotiation, leadership, and ethical decision-making critical in management and organisational roles.	Equips the entrepreneur to pitch ideas, attract investors, and negotiate partnerships – core activities in venture creation and resource acquisition (Onyemah & Rivera-Pesquera, 2021).
Empathy and Customer Orientation (Inks et al., 2020; Yeo & Jan, 2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifying • Handling objection • Closing • After sales 	Fosters emotional intelligence, enhancing relationship-building and conflict resolution, which are useful for managing teams.	Develops the rational sensitivity required to build founding teams, manage stakeholder relationships, and understand customer-market fit (Blocker et al., 2012).
Adaptability and Problem-Solving (Hughes et al., 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifying • Handling objection • Closing • After sales 	Cultivates resilience and quick thinking, valuable for entrepreneurship and project management.	Directly reinforces entrepreneurial resilience and effectual thinking, enabling entrepreneurs to pivot, reframe challenges, and sustain venture momentum under uncertainty (Dalecki, 2019).
Product and Industry Knowledge (Edwards et al., 2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting • Closing • After sales 	Builds expertise essential for strategic decision-making and innovativeness.	Deepens domain expertise and market understanding, enhancing the entrepreneur's capacity to identify niches, refine value propositions and positions the venture competitively (Edwards et al., 2022).
Communication and Teaching (Gilliam & Zablah, 2013; Johlke, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting • Closing • After sales 	Enhances ability to educate, train, and clearly articulate ideas, useful in leadership and team dynamics.	Cultivates the narrative and pedagogical skills needed to build organisational culture, onboard talent, and communicate vision – foundational to entrepreneurial leadership (R. Matthews et al., 2016).

Table 2: Summary of key scholarly contributions and proposed future research directions

Scholar(s)	Key contribution	Gap Identified	Proposed Future Research Direction
Dalecki (2019)	Contextualises ES as situated, relational practice shaped by industry, stage and cultural context.	Context-dependence of selling skills and their developmental effects remain underexplored	Examine how selling context (sector, venture stage, culture) shapes entrepreneurial skill development trajectories across different founder profiles
Matthews et al. (2018)	Landmark interdisciplinary framework establishes ES as a constitutive of venture development, shaping opportunity recognition, networks and strategy	The seller's developmental trajectory i.e. identity formation, capability accumulation and resilience-building remain understated	Investigate how cumulative selling experience shapes entrepreneurial identity and competence over time, using longitudinal studies and tracing seller-to-entrepreneur transitions.
Mhaka (2025) SAVE model	Reframes value delivery from product-push to Solution, Access, Value and Education, which is a customer-centric evolution.	SAVE model has not been applied or tested in ES contexts, particularly for resource-constrained founders	Test SAVE model applicability in ES contexts; explore how founders adapt its principles when building credibility and early customer relationships.
Geiger & Kelly (2014)	Sales-as-practice perspective positions selling as socially embedded, materially mediated activity, elevating micro practices of selling.	Practice-based methodology has rarely been applied to ES research.	Apply sales-as-practice methodology to study ES micro-practices e.g. pitching, negotiating, objection handling, and their venture-level efforts.
Thompson et al (2020) Shepherd (2015)	The practice turn in entrepreneurship foregrounds learning-by-doing, situated action and identity formation through entrepreneurial activity.	Selling has not yet been systematically integrated into the EaP literature as a site of entrepreneurial becoming	Develop practice-grounded research programme examining ES as a transformative site of entrepreneurial identity, resilience and competence formation