

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

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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

Selling, Entrepreneurial Selling, Seller-centric research, Selling skills, Entrepreneurial know-how

Introduction

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 append to this existing discourse by shifting attention from customer-centric selling to seller-centric developmental impacts that impact 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.

Literature Review

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; Manning et al., 2015; 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 S.A.V.E. (Solutions, Access, Value, Education) framework (Mhaka, 2025) and service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) have shifted the focus toward tailoring solutions, enhancing customer experience and empowering buyers in complex decision processes. 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.

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; DSN, 2017; 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, 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.

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.

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
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.
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.
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.
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.

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.
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.

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 Practice Turn

This perspective aligns well with the practice turn in entrepreneurship, where the emphasis is on situated, iterative, and embodied entrepreneurial action (Geiger & Kelly, 2014; Matthews et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2020). Selling is not only about creating solutions for customers but also about enabling entrepreneurs to develop credibility, refine their value propositions, and accumulate critical relational capital (Blocker et al., 2012; Chandna & Salimath, 2018; Rehme & Svensson, 2011). Furthermore, Matthews et al. (2018) and Onyemah & Rivera-Pesquera (2021) demonstrate that ES involves unique challenges and learning processes distinct from professional sales, suggesting that it deserves recognition as a research stream in its own right.

The practice turn in entrepreneurship 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, stakeholders, and markets to co-create opportunities. Rather than viewing selling as a unidirectional transaction, it should be understood as a complex, recursive entrepreneurial practice critical to the development of the individual who is central to venture emergence and growth.

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.

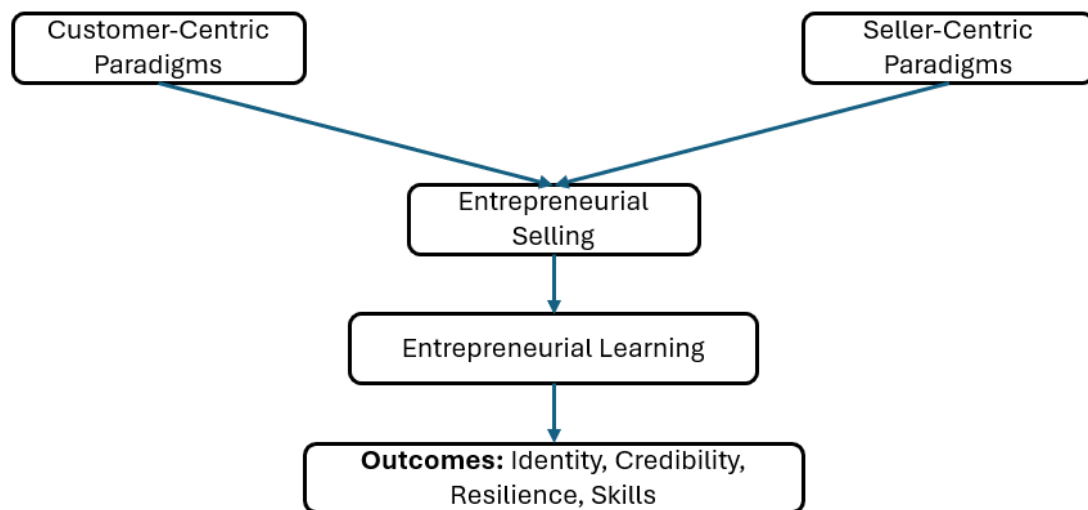


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of seller-centric entrepreneurial selling.

In this framework, the left anchor positions the seller as a facilitator of solutions and trusted advisor, focusing on long-term relationships and customer empowerment. Equally important is the right anchor (the seller-centric research paradigm) which suggests that the seller is understood as an active agent, whose identity and learning evolve through the practice of selling. Balancing these two creates a convergence layer of a reconceptualised ES. In addition, as entrepreneurs navigate ES with awareness of its benefits to their development, it translates to a developmental layer of enhanced skill development and reinforced competence in

opportunity recognition and exploitation through learning-by-doing. As this accrues, richer outcomes of credibility, identity, resilience and adaptable skills result.

This conceptual framework shows that while customer-centric and seller-centric paradigms both influence selling, ES serves as the practice-based bridge that enables entrepreneurial learning and leads to transformative outcomes for the entrepreneur, which is worthy of a shift in the research agenda.

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 contributes to the development of entrepreneurial identity, skills and resilience, as well as elaborating mechanisms through which sales credibility accelerates milestone achievements like first sales and early scaling. There is also scope to align opportunity theory more closely with empirical studies of selling practices and how credibility-driven practices accelerate early venture legitimacy and how learning-by-selling (Olorunfemi et al., 2025) contributes to entrepreneurial capability building. In short, repositioning selling as a facilitating entrepreneurial practice rather than a mere customer-facing activity opens avenues for richer, more balanced and practice-grounded research.

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 entrepreneurship-as-practice 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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