

# Negotiating Beyond Face-to-Face: Critical Challenges and Skill Requirements in Digital Buyer–Seller Interactions

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## ABSTRACT

All sales communications aim to identify customer needs, articulate value propositions, and guide the buyer's decision-making process. With the rise of digital transformation and changed customer demands, sales communication activities need to be aligned related to virtual sales. This article highlights the findings of virtual negotiation competencies study conducted with Austrian and Finnish companies during 2023–2025. Totally 39 interviews were conducted with sales professionals. Findings revealed that in virtual sales, behavioral competences must compensate for reduced attention, compressed time windows and higher risks of misunderstanding. The importance of a positive, open stance toward virtual interaction was also stressed. In addition, it was found that sellers must actively interpret reduced visual signals and adapt to absent, ambiguous, or disrupted cues. Virtual professionalism, like time management and start-of-call checks, were indicators of preparedness and competence. Technical staging influenced impressions and directed attention and engagement in sales communications.

**Keywords:** B2B sales, Online, Virtual interaction, Sales communication

## INTRODUCTION

Negotiation is an integral part of business relationships shaping how value is created, partnerships are formed, and conflicts are resolved. (Saorín-iborra et al., 2019). Business negotiations are directly affecting strategic outcomes and long-term organizational performance, and they are in communication, psychology, and strategic decision-making (Richards et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2011). The ability to negotiate effectively is essential for achieving sustainable competitive advantage and ultimately determining if a company will make profit or not. Negotiation is a key function in the buyer-seller interaction (Zachariassen, 2008) and they can be complex, involving several factors that influence behavior and outcomes (Zhang et al., 2021).

As digital technologies offer new opportunities to establish and maintain customer relationships, sales activities need to be aligned with the rise of digital transformation and changed customer demands (Fischer et al., 2023; Agnihotri et al., 2023; Voss et al., 2023).

All sales communications aim to identify customer needs, articulate value propositions, and guide the buyer's decision-making process (Weitz et al., 2008).

Koponen et al. (2019) conceptualize sales communication competence as four analytically distinct dimensions: a behavioral communication dimension capturing observable interaction behaviors such as rapport building, trust creation, needs-focused questioning, negotiation, and language use; an affective communication dimension reflecting motivational and attitudinal states (e.g., willingness to engage international customers, curiosity, empathy, and respect for cultural others); a cognitive communication dimension denoting knowledge resources (e.g., negotiation styles, nonverbal patterns, cultural norms/face-saving) and meta-cognitive reflection on one's own and others' communication; and sales acumen, a sales-specific knowledge/skill core encompassing strategic understanding of buyer behavior, sales processes, business models/CRM, value creation and shared goals, plus leadership capabilities such as team motivation, problem-solving, and time management (Koponen et al., 2019).

## STUDY CONDUCTED

To investigate expectations and lived experiences related to virtual B2B selling, a study with 39 interviews was conducted. The study relied on an interpretive qualitative design. The primary data source consisted of expert interviews, chosen on the grounds that understanding B2B sales processes requires informed perspectives from practitioners. Accordingly, inclusion was limited to individuals with at least five years of B2B sales experience who occupied senior or responsibility-bearing roles (e.g., Sales Manager, Chief Executive Officer, or Key Account Manager). Participants were selected via generic purposive sampling (Bryman, 2015). Data comprised 39 interviews in total. Of these, 14 were conducted with experts based in Austria and 25 with experts based in Finland. Fieldwork took place from September 2023 to February 2024. Interviews typically lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. The interview setting followed practical constraints: depending on location and scheduling possibilities, conversations were held either in person or via videoconferencing. A semi-structured guide was used to balance comparability across interviews with sufficient flexibility, while also supporting the protection of participants and their organizations. To ensure confidentiality, all material was anonymized prior to dissemination by removing or generalizing identifying information without compromising the interpretive value of the data.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2008). Building on Braun and Clarke's (2008) approach, four categories were developed deductively from the academic literature. The conceptual basis was provided by Koponen et al. (2019), who define sales communication competence across four distinct dimensions: (1) behavioural = observable interaction behaviours (e.g., rapport and trust building, needs-based questioning, negotiation, language use). (2) Affective = motivational

and attitudinal states (e.g., willingness to engage with international customers, curiosity, empathy, respect for cultural others). (3) Cognitive—knowledge of negotiation styles, nonverbal patterns, and cultural norms (e.g., face-saving), complemented by metacognitive reflection on self and others. (4) Sales acumen = sales-specific expertise in buyer behaviour, sales processes, business models/CRM, value creation and shared goals, including leadership-related skills (e.g., team motivation, problem-solving, time management) (Koponen et al., 2019).

In addition, three further categories emerged inductively during analysis: (5) Virtual Meeting Professionalism and Technical Staging, referring to ensuring a credible, brand-consistent online presence (e.g., lighting, camera angle, audio quality, background, and systematic pre-call checks). (6) Attention and Engagement Management in Virtual Selling, capturing deliberate tactics to counter digital drift (e.g., managing media switching, structuring interaction, active moderation, and preventing “lost in translation” moments). (7) Camera-Off Dynamics and Identity Uncertainty, addressing communicative challenges associated with non-visible participants, unclear roles, and ambiguity regarding decision-makers in virtual calls.

## RESULTS

### Behavioral Communication Competence

Interviewees described behavioral competence in virtual selling as a set of observable interaction practices that must compensate for reduced attention, compressed time windows and higher risks of misunderstanding.

A central behavioral requirement was accelerated rapport building, where relational “rituals” (e.g. small talk) remain necessary but must be executed more efficiently online to match shorter attention spans (Interview 1). Several interviewees linked relationship quality directly to commercial outcomes, stressing that insufficient relational grounding becomes particularly consequential in critical phases of the deal and may contribute to loss (Interview 6; Interview 10).

*“This is extremely important if you continually negotiate with the same persons. Knowing you contact in more personal level makes negotiations easier...”* (Interview 24)

Beyond rapport, interviewees emphasized disciplined interaction design: virtual conversations should be shorter, clearer and more tightly focused on essentials (Interview 5), supported by explicit structure (e.g., introduction, questions, tasks, targets) and active process guidance (Interview 9). This also includes rule-setting and moderation, making meeting norms explicit (Interview 9).

In international contexts, interviewees highlighted language management behaviors: speaking slowly and plainly, producing unambiguous statements and recognizing when language barriers are emerging (Interview 1; Interview 9).

### **Affective Communication Dimension**

Affective competence was presented as an enabling condition for effective virtual selling rather than a “soft add-on.” Interviewees stressed the importance of a positive, open stance toward virtual interaction, including explicit acceptance of the virtual environment and its perceived advantages (Interview 11). This attitudinal readiness was framed as particularly relevant when salesforces include more experienced employees who may be slower to adopt or value virtual formats (Interview 11).

A further affective theme concerned relational prudence and social tact. Politeness was described as essential, yet interviewees warned that humor can become riskier in virtual settings where relational familiarity is limited and social distance feels greater. (Interview 24).

*“Be generally positive & polite. Be careful with jokes before you know the contact.”* (Interview 24)

### **Cognitive Communication Dimension**

Interviewees described a heightened need for cognitive attention to limited non-verbal information: rather than relying on full-body cues available in co-located settings, sellers must actively interpret reduced visual signals and adapt in real time when cues are absent, ambiguous, or disrupted (Interview 26). This included the ability to improvise interaction strategies when conventional non-verbal feedback loops fail (Interview 26).

*“...you can’t... react to things like another’s sign language. Reading non-verbal communication is an important part... you have to know how improvise...”* (Interview 26)

### **Sales Acumen**

Sales acumen was described as the domain-specific capacity to place virtual meetings appropriately within the sales process and to lead internal coordination effectively. Interviewees highlighted the need to know when virtual meetings add value and when they do not. Particularly in early phases where buyers may prefer minimal seller contact (Interview 13).

Time discipline was positioned as both leadership and self-management competence, reflecting the intensified cadence of virtual work (Interview 32).

### **Virtual Meeting Professionalism and Technical Staging**

Virtual professionalism emerged as an immediately visible competence, with interviewees framing the first minutes as decisive for perceived credibility. Sellers were expected to establish attendance and role visibility from the outset, including being early (particularly as host) to secure an overview of who is present (Interview 6). Interviewees also emphasized systematic pre-call and start-of-call checks (microphone, camera, connection) as a ritualized demonstration of preparedness and competence (Interview 31). Technical staging (lighting, audio, background) was described as materially shaping impressions: lighting was portrayed as essential to professionalism

(Interview 11) and audio quality was treated as central to trust and intelligibility (Interview 10).

*“I very often start online meetings by testing the connection (microphone and camera functionality) and by introducing myself.”* (Interview 31)

*“First of all, light... light is essential.”* (Interview 11)

### **Attention & Engagement Management in Virtual Selling**

Attention management was described as a distinct competence because virtual environments foster distraction and “drift.” Interviewees stated that sellers need variety and interaction design to offset a lower attention span than in face-to-face meetings (Interview 13). Tactics included actively involving participants through questions and interactive sequences (Interview 13). Interviewees also emphasized moderation and assertiveness to keep the call on course, describing the seller’s role as maintaining process control in real time (Interview 21). Finally, attention management included contingency planning: for high-stakes meetings, sellers should prepare a backup communication channel and a rule for switching media if technical issues cannot be resolved quickly (Interview 21).

*“You need more variety... otherwise attention span is lower than in a physical meeting.”* (Interview 13)

*“...there must always be a backup... if it can’t be resolved within 5 minutes, then we turn on the cell phone...”* (Interview 21)

### **Camera-Off Dynamics & Identity Uncertainty**

Camera-off practices were reported as a salient friction point in virtual selling, affecting both relational dynamics and situational clarity. Interviewees described reduced “social reinforcement” and a weaker meeting dynamic when participants are not visible, including noticeable impacts on the seller’s own engagement and interpretive capacity (Interview 6). At the same time, interviewees reported uncertainty about whether and how to request camera activation, characterizing this as socially delicate and sometimes “strange” (Interview 6).

*“I don’t dare to ask... could you turn on the camera?... a strange dynamic...”* (Interview 6)

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study demonstrates that virtual B2B selling competence extends well beyond classical sales communication skills. In digital selling environments, effectiveness hinges on a broader, more operationally grounded capability set that integrates technical orchestration, interaction design and deliberate management of visibility, engagement, and process control.

For management, the key implication is to treat virtual selling competence as an operational quality system rather than an individual soft-skill topic. This involves defining minimum standards for technical set-up and “technical staging,” mandating meeting designs that preserve process control.

Competence development should be socially embedded and practice-oriented: Joint negotiation simulations, peer observation, systematic feedback loops and mentoring communities. In this context, formal trainings, guidelines and checklists should transfer into day-to-day selling practice.

At the individual level, performance depends on disciplined micro-practices suited to low-cue and often multilingual settings: accelerated rapport building, explicit structuring and moderation, plain-language signalling and the active interpretation and compensation of reduced non-verbal cues.

Several avenues for future research emerge from these results. First, competence profiles should be compared across deal phases (e.g., qualification, needs exploration, negotiation, closing) and across cultural contexts to assess which competence elements are stable and which are contingent on situational and institutional factors. Second, the role of camera-off dynamics warrants systematic investigation, particularly regarding their effects on trust formation and perceived transparency.

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