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PITCHING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: TOWARD A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO SELLING AND BUYING SOCIAL ISSUES

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In the issue-selling literature, little attention has been paid to the struggles of those managers who try to sell social issues to potential issue buyers who are not particularly sensitive to the normative elements of these social issues. In this study, we examine the case of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and concomitant dynamics of selling social issues and address two interrelated questions. First, how do the sellers of social issues perceive themselves and their organizational roles, and how does this motivate them to engage in selling social issues in the first place? Second, how do these perceptions influence the strategies that issue sellers use to win over skeptics? To answer these questions, we focus on the relationships that issue sellers build with buyers and on the role of this form of engagement in overcoming resistance to social issues. Our findings shed new light on the motivation, aspirations, and strategies of issue sellers and suggest that a relational approach can provide important insights into understanding selling and buying social issues within organizational contexts. Furthermore, our findings pave the way for future research on selling social issues as a relational endeavor.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars who study organizational change often see organizations as “a cacophony of complementary and competing change attempts, with managers at all levels joining the fray and pushing for issues of particular importance to themselves” (Dutton, Ashford, O’Neill, & Lawrence, 2001: 716). In this “marketplace of ideas” (ibid: 716), struggles arise between those who aim to “sell”—that is, promote—issues and those who are expected to “buy” them—that is, pay attention to them. Issue sellers can use a variety of “moves” (Dutton et al., 2001) to attract the attention of potential issue buyers. There is extensive research on how issue sellers affect top management (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001). However, much less attention has been paid to the moves that issue sellers use and how they interact and relate to potential buyers at the same or lower levels of the organizational hierarchy. For instance, little is known about how issue sellers create momentum within their organizations for the issues they champion.

Social issues in particular, such as climate change, gender equity, and CSR have received scant attention in the literature (Sonenshein, DeCelles, & Dutton, 2014). According to Maurer, Bansal, & Crossan (2011: 436) social issues can be defined “as events, developments, or trends that go beyond the purely economic and technical aspects of the issue, and can activate the social values of organizational field members and agents.” The social nature of these issues may pose certain challenges and barriers that issue sellers have to tackle; it may also require issue sellers to devise and use specific moves to overcome resistance from their peers.

Because social issues are likely to have normative elements that are sometimes perceived as incongruent with economic or technical concerns, the sellers of such issues need to possess particular skills and abilities and use particular moves to approach buyers. For instance, Sonenshein et al. (2014: 8) argued that “social issue supporters are often strongly identified with an issue and thus are different from the general population, who might be on average more apathetic or indifferent toward the [social] issue.” This argument suggests that comparing and contrasting efforts to sell social issues with efforts to sell traditional strategic business issues could provide valuable insights into how individuals inside organizations can nudge other organizational members toward making a positive impact on business aspects that are not based solely on an economic and technical rationale. Understanding this process is imperative because a range of stakeholders increasingly urge business firms to pay attention to

social, environmental, and ethical matters and, in consequence, many business firms aim to ensure that social issues are sold to and accepted by their members (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Bansal, 2003; Sonenshein et al., 2014; Wang, Tong, Takeuchi, & George, 2016). The literature on CSR, however, only provides limited insight into the behavior of the agents of social change “who operate inside firms” (Sonenshein, 2016: 362).

In the present paper, we zoom in on selling social issues on the level of the individual and focus on two questions. First, we examine how the motivation and aspirations of the sellers of social issues influence how these actors perceive their own organizational role. Second, we examine how the social nature of issues such as CSR (in contrast to more traditional issues of strategic change) influences the moves that sellers use to engage with “skeptics”; that is, potential issue buyers who may not be as sensitive as the sellers are to the social issue in question. We expect that the normative nature of such issues means that “standard” strategic arguments will not always convince potential buyers and that, as a consequence, the sellers of social issues have to use different moves from those that the sellers of “traditional” issues use.

To address these questions, we conducted an inductive study of sellers of social issues in organizational contexts; specifically, of CSR managers in German multinational corporations (MNCs). Our aim was to examine the intentions of such sellers and the moves they chose and to interpret them from their point of view. Our qualitative data provide insights into the motivation and aspirations that drive the sellers of social issues to pursue their goals and reveal a repertoire of engagement strategies that these sellers draw on to build relationships with issue buyers when pitching for social change.

The first section of our study shows how the self-perception of sellers as internal agents of change and their dissatisfaction with the status quo motivate them to create positive social impact and at the same time temper their approach so as not to overwhelm buyers with social issues that might seem incomprehensible. In the second section, we examine how issue sellers engage with buyers, first and foremost to build relationships with them. We found that sellers leverage their comparably weak organizational positions by gradually accumulating internal influence and the support of likeminded others. Furthermore, sellers draw on both the emotional and functional appeal of social issues when they interact with buyers and tailor their approach according to how they think buyers view the world and what incentives might motivate them to evaluate social issues positively. Taken together, our findings shed

new light on how issues are sold and bought and suggest that selling social issues should be seen as a relational endeavor that sellers carry out with the aid of a repertoire of relational techniques for approaching buyers. In that respect, our study provides important insights into how relational processes work on the individual level of analysis in the context of selling social issues and thereby opens up new avenues for research and practice.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: first, we identify important knowledge gaps in the literature on issue selling, introduce the relevant social context, and link our topic to current debates on CSR. We also describe what CSR implementation entails and highlight the special role of CSR managers in that process. After explaining our methods, we provide an in-depth analysis of our empirical findings, on the basis of which we then explain the relational approach to selling social issues that emerged from our data. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings for the literature on issue selling and CSR and of the avenues for future research that they open.

SELLING SOCIAL ISSUES WITHIN BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

Over time, a considerable body of literature has developed around issue selling (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Sonenshein, 2006). Issue selling involves “the process by which individuals affect others’ attention and understanding of the events, developments, and trends that have implications for organizational performance” (Dutton et al., 2001: 716). Initially, a lot of attention in this literature was devoted to the practice of issue selling (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), particularly to influence behaviors, and to identifying a range of characteristics of issue sellers (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Rouleau, 2005). Furthermore, topics such as the organizational context (Dutton, Ashford, O’Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997) and leaders’ receptivity to employee voice (Detert & Burris, 2007) have been covered abundantly, while attention has also been paid to issue-selling effectiveness (Howard-Grenville, 2007) and issue selling in MNCs (Ling, Floyd, & Baldrige, 2005). Less attention has been given to the relationship between influence behaviors and organizational contexts.

Also, this literature has only given limited recognition to *social* issue selling. Some studies of issue selling have looked at issues that stretch beyond profit maximization, such as environmental considerations in product design (Howard-Grenville, 2007), gender equity (Dutton et al., 2002), or generating support for environmental issues (Bansal, 2003; Sonenshein et al., 2014). Although such studies indicate some of the specific properties of social issues selling, such as the role of a wider and more complex context, they usually look at only one social issue at a time.

One notable exception is the recent work by Sonenshein et al. (2014). Drawing on a multi-method approach, these authors combined insights from psychology and organizational studies to examine the role of self-evaluations of environmental issue supporters in their efforts to successfully sell these issues within their organizations. They found that context is indeed important in social issue selling and that issue sellers are partly driven by self-evaluations in their support for specific issues. Sonenshein et al. (2014: 8) offer useful insights on “both how contexts shape social issue support and how individuals’ self-evaluations play a meaningful role in understanding the experiences and, ultimately, the issue-supportive behaviors of individuals working on social issues.” These authors argue that their study helps to “explain why it is difficult to be a social issue supporter but also present[s] guidance for strengthening social issues supporters” (Sonenshein et al., 2014: 31). In an earlier study, Sonenshein (2009: 237) also developed a “theory of ethical issue emergence” and suggested how some employees could turn strategic issues into ethical issues, looking at sensemaking and issue crafting.

Although these studies offer important insights into social issue selling and pay some attention to what they term relational and organizational challenges, the main focus in this work is on self-evaluations, “self-work”, issue emergence, and crafting, placing little emphasis on the interactions between issue sellers and potential buyers in the issue-selling process. Although self-evaluations are an important component in organizational behavior in general (Erez & Judge, 2001) and in issue selling in particular (Ashford & Barton, 2007), we set out to uncover a broader view of social issue selling. In this article, we focus on how a broader category of social issues—those concerning the notion of CSR—are being sold within organizations, and how especially middle managers play an important role in this process. We combine insights on middle managers’ daily activities in issue management (Rouleau, 2005) with insights on the specific properties of social issues (Alt & Craig, 2016; Sonenshein, 2006, 2009; Sonenshein et al., 2014) and CSR (Aguilera et al., 2007; Wickert, Scherer, & Spence, 2016) to focus

Author’s voice:

What motivated you personally to undertake this research? Why is it important to you?

specifically on CSR managers as social issue sellers and on how they maneuver around constraints imposed by those organizational members that they expect to buy the social issue. Our aim is to examine the interactions that occur *inside* organizations when sellers transmit the meaning and scope of a social issue to other organizational members.

Selling CSR Issues

Although most contemporary businesses appear to accept the basic ideas of CSR that business firms have some sort of responsibility for their actions toward society, the exact specification of CSR in organizational practice is highly contested (Aguilera et al., 2007; Wickert et al., 2016). Just as the lean management practices Morris and Lancaster (2006: 218) studied, CSR represents “a cocktail of techniques and ideas that could be mixed in different ways.” Issue selling seems to play an important role in understanding how this “mixing” is done; the way these issues are sold will impact how CSR is shaped in practice.

Although there is broad general support for the notion of CSR, substantial contestation arises once organizational members are confronted with the need to implement CSR-related issues in core business activities that require them to significantly adapt existing routines and modify accustomed behaviors and work processes, getting from issues to actions (Bansal, 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to explore the ways in which organizational members who are responsible for selling these issues try to transform abstract ideas such as CSR into concrete new responsibilities and tasks. After all, CSR “is a difficult concept for businesses to interpret and implement” (Vidal, Kozak, & Hansen, 2015: 702) as it involves the internal organizational integration or rearrangement of operational practices and procedures that reflect environmental, social, and ethical concerns, and which may or may not be developed in collaboration with stakeholders and along the supply chain. This makes CSR an ambiguous and complex social issue to sell.

A common approach in management studies has been to develop frameworks and formal tools for CSR implementation. As Vidal et al. (2015) noted, such tools commonly include codes of conduct; policies addressing specific issues such as human rights, environmental sustainability, or health and safety; key performance indicators and monitoring of social and environmental behavior, such as carbon emissions, training, and education programs; and CSR reporting. Hence, a lot of work has been done to identify what CSR issues entail (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; de Bakker, Groenewegen, & den Hond, 2005) or what the performance implications of CSR are (Lyneis & Sterman, 2016).

However, only a few studies have empirically investigated the concrete actions taken by those who are in charge of implementing CSR inside organizations (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2009). Consequently, research has paid limited attention to potential internal barriers, constraints, and tensions that CSR managers need to overcome when promoting CSR along a particular framework. Aguilera et al. (2007), for instance, argue that individual characteristics and attitudes of organizational members might drive CSR engagement, such as sense of self-esteem, belongingness, and purpose; yet, they did not zoom in on the daily activities that people use to promote CSR implementation internally. Understanding the activities of social issue sellers, however, is likely to be particularly important in cases where a social issue—such as CSR—has been granted strategic relevance by the top management of an organization, but may lack managerial buy in from the organization’s base. As Howard-Grenville (2007) noted in her ethnographic research on environmental product design, issue selling also involves overcoming resistance of buyers, rather than only focusing on self-evaluations and contexts. Other works of Sonenshein (2006, 2009) point at the role of language in crafting social issues and at the role of processes of sensemaking and sensegiving in identifying these issues in the first place. Despite this important groundwork, when it comes to investigating the issue-selling moves and concomitant interactions between sellers and buyers, most of the literature appears to have largely overlooked possible internal barriers such as a lack of motivation and sheer interest in social issues such as CSR, or even denial among employees of specific practices that might hamper CSR implementation. We argue that a particular group of issue sellers, the CSR managers, could be well positioned to overcome such resistance and sell their issues within the organization.

CSR Managers as Social Issue Sellers

CSR managers, also often referred to as sustainability managers, or ethics officers, are a group of intraorganizational agents who play an increasingly important role in shaping the way organizations behave with regard to CSR through their social issue-selling activities (Strand, 2013). CSR managers are commonly located at middle-managerial positions and, over time, have assumed the position of the key agents responsible for integrating CSR-related practices and procedures inside their organizations (Risi & Wickert, 2017). Although top management determines the CSR strategy, middle managers and lower-level employees must implement CSR into day-to-day operations (Maon et al., 2009).

The CSR managers' role is to "put into effect the direction established by top management by making sure that resources are allocated and controlled appropriately [...] and explaining the strategy to those [functional managers in other departments] reporting to them" (Johnson & Scholes, 2002: 552). Importantly, the organizational position of CSR managers usually differs from conventional employee-supervisor relationships. Their organizational positions have been described as relatively weak (Daudigeos, 2013; Risi & Wickert, 2017) because CSR managers rarely are direct supervisors of those employees expected to handle certain new CSR practices, rather they have staff functions that are often external to the regular corporate hierarchy (Strand, 2013). Consequently, although leadership support for CSR is important and has been abundantly covered in the literature (Maak, Pless, & Voegtlin, 2016; Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006), examining social issue selling by CSR managers requires to also pay attention to "lateral" relationships between organizational members (Ashford, Sutcliffe, & Christianson, 2009). Whereas much of the issue-selling literature has focused on how issues are sold "upwards" to top management (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Dutton et al., 2001; Sonenshein, 2016), less attention has been paid to interactions between different middle managers with comparable authority, such as the head of the CSR department and the head of the procurement department, as well as "middle-down" processes. Therefore, the CSR context offers a unique case in which issue selling is more than a top-down process that starts at the top-management level and trickles down to the lowest level of hierarchy, but in addition to top-management endorsement also includes a mix of relationships between different middle managers and middle- and lower-level employees.

In sum, the literature suggests that CSR managers play a key role in the selling of CSR-related issues. Although the character and personality traits of these managers have been described and general skepticism of social issues seems common inside many business organizations (Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012; Wright & Nyberg, 2012), we still lack an understanding of how this situation influences the day-to-day practices in which social issue sellers engage and how they interact with potential issue buyers when attempting to sell and implement CSR.

METHODS

Data Collection

The first author collected qualitative data between November 2012 and August 2013 through 54 open-ended interviews with CSR managers in German MNCs, either face-to-face or by phone. Following a theoretical sampling approach, we selected Germany as our research site because that country has attained high societal pressures directed toward MNCs to implement CSR in its various forms. For example, the German government has launched a CSR platform to encourage companies to develop a CSR strategy. Also, the civil society sector in Germany is particularly strong and present in the media, and socially responsible investment products are widely available on the market (Hiss, 2009). The aforementioned factors, along with the fact that German MNCs are under increasing scrutiny to thoroughly implement many CSR-related issues in their internal structures and procedures, have led these companies to develop advanced CSR strategies. In other words, German MNCs must ensure that CSR issues are sold and accepted within their firms. To do this, many firms have established the CSR manager function, and almost all of Germany's largest publicly listed firms (that is, those companies listed on the DAX or MDAX stock indexes) now have a CSR department. Therefore, German MNCs offer a data-rich and illustrative empirical context for our inductive theorizing, which is comparable with other industrialized economies, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Scandinavian countries, and France. This is because CSR is becoming increasingly standardized and MNCs tend to follow globally available guidelines for managing CSR, such as the framework of the Global Reporting Initiative, ISO 26000, or the principles of the UN Global Compact (Baumann-Pauly, Wickert, Spence, & Scherer, 2013).

We started gathering data by searching for companies listed on the German stock index (DAX and MDAX). By doing so, we ensured broad cross-industry coverage and a representative sample of MNCs. We then screened the companies' websites, where companies commonly publish the contact details of their CSR spokespersons. Because the CSR domain includes various job titles and functions, we applied a categorization based on keywords (Strand, 2013) to deliberately sample informants. We used the following keywords to identify CSR managers: "corporate social responsibility," "corporate responsibility," "corporate sustainability," "social responsibility," "ethics," and "health, safety and environment." Therefore, our informants had job titles such as "head of corporate social responsibility," "head of sustainability office," "corporate

Author's voice:

How did the paper evolve and change as you worked on it?

responsibility senior vice-president,” “corporate responsibility manager,” and “head of sustainability strategy & reporting.”² This approach enabled us to compile a list of nearly 125 potential candidates that fitted our theoretical sampling criteria.

Following an inductive approach to theorize the internal dynamics of social issue selling in the context of CSR, we closely followed the methodology described by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). This research design allowed rich contextualization, vivid description, and an appreciation of subjective views, as we aimed to capture and interpret the point of view of the “natives” (Locke, 2001). We increased analytical rigor by dividing our investigation into two subsequent research phases, each including discrete and sequential categories of data collection and analysis. In the *first* phase, we contacted 15 potential informants and arranged nine exploratory face-to-face interviews with CSR managers, each from a different industry and MNC. For these interviews (and also for the face-to-face interviews in Phase II), the first author visited the informants at their company’s headquarters throughout Germany to become acquainted with their work environment. This approach enabled further informal discussions with informants over lunch (for example, after the official interview had ended), in which they often shared more sensitive information. Also, in several cases, informants gave a short tour of their CSR departments to the first author, who was able to engage in additional informal conversations with colleagues. This was informative because it showed, for instance, where the CSR department was located in relation to other units such as the board of directors, other corporate functions, or productive units. In our subsequent data analysis, we found that this influenced some of the issue-selling moves in which CSR managers considered physical proximity to other actors very important. In all cases, the author made detailed handwritten notes directly after the interview.

Although the interviews were relatively open and unstructured, we were mainly discussing the issue of CSR implementation and the challenges that CSR managers felt were part of their daily work. In these

exploratory interviews, we did not have an exact picture or even a research outcome or theory in mind that would implicitly call for confirmation; rather, we were interested in revealing why it seemed so difficult to sell CSR-related social issues. To this end, we asked the following questions: “Can you describe how the implementation of CSR issues works?” “Who is involved internally when implementing CSR?” and “What are the obstacles and difficulties involved in selling CSR-related issues?” The nine interviews lasted between 33 and 102 minutes (approximately 75 minutes on average) and were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. They helped us collect primary data and gradually build our knowledge of the field. By the end of the first phase, we had identified a range of broad issue-selling moves that CSR managers applied to overcome specific organizational barriers to change that they felt they had been confronted with. On the basis of these insights, we formulated new open-ended interview questions that explicitly addressed the selling of social issues (see interview manual of Phase II in Appendix) and aimed to expand our initial insights.

In Phase II, based on the sampling strategy described earlier, we contacted 60 CSR managers in German MNCs, 45 of whom agreed to give an interview, either face-to-face (nine interviews, conducted when the first author visited the companies’ headquarters) or by phone (36 interviews). Most of the semi-structured interviews were held in German and some were held in English. Interviews lasted between 31 and 98 minutes (on average about 60 minutes), were tape-recorded, and were fully transcribed. In some cases, where interviewees felt uncomfortable being recorded, we took detailed notes during and directly after the interviews. We used the same basic manual for all interviews as this procedure allows a rigorous comparison of the data. However, we also encouraged informants to discuss additional topics if they felt like doing so and gradually updated the interview manual. To build trust and to allow a higher probability of uncovering sensitive data, we ensured all interviewees’ anonymity in the data analysis. Overall, research Phase II not only enabled us to consolidate the emerging categories we had explored in Phase I, but also helped us to detect important additional details. Moreover, Phase II allowed for theoretical saturation in terms of gathering sufficient data to develop the inductive reasoning process presented in the following

² A notable specificity of the German context is that the CSR function generally subsumes social and environmental issues with equal importance. We use the CSR label in this study as it is the most commonly used keyword in the literature to describe how corporations deal with social—and environmental—issues. Several German MNCs, however, refrain from using the CSR label and refer to it as corporate responsibility instead to emphasize that they not only address social but also environmental issues, hence our inclusion of the keyword “corporate responsibility” among the job titles.

Author’s voice:
How did you get access to your data
or site?

section because no new categories emerged during the last few interviews we conducted.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

We drew on inductive coding methodologies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Gioia et al., 2013) to develop theoretical categories and to identify themes as they emerged during data collection. This process was guided by an interpretive approach to understand issue selling from the perspective of those involved and by our practical–hermeneutic knowledge interest, which aims to provide an enriched understanding of human sociocultural experiences and how meaning is communicated, generated, and transformed by participants (Habermas, 1971). We started the data analysis by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and by grouping individual descriptions of the different day-to-day activities of CSR managers via open coding (Locke, 2001) into basic categories that represented “a slightly higher level of abstraction—higher than the data itself” (Martin & Turner, 1986). For instance, one of the first open codes that we assigned referred to general difficulties that CSR managers experienced in the issue-selling process, whereas another open code referred to all statements in which CSR managers explained that they had “teamed up” with others in the organization when trying to sell social issues. Based on these broad descriptors, we re-read the data material and aimed to provide further detail about, for instance, why CSR managers stated that they sought to collaborate with others and what form this collaboration took.

This procedure allowed patterns to emerge (first-order concepts) based on the different descriptions detected previously, giving “those categories labels or phrasal descriptors (preferably retaining informant terms)” (Gioia et al., 2013: 20). We then gradually added further data in the form of interview quotes for the purpose of developing more robust theoretical concepts, and iteratively travelled back and forth between the data and emerging categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Whenever we found an interesting theoretical category in the interview material, we compared this with secondary data about the informants’ companies, such as graphical illustrations in CSR reports, and revised our analysis.

We also consulted the issue-selling and related literatures to examine, challenge, and consolidate our conclusions and elucidate the theoretical constructs (second-order themes) that emerged. This second-order analysis helped us to develop a relational approach to selling social issues. Our focus here was to acquire an understanding of social issue

selling within organizations, thereby filling a gap in the literature. We further distilled the second-order themes into aggregate dimensions as the final step of abstraction, comprising a set of social issue-selling moves in the context of CSR. Our inductive coding procedure is illustrated in Tables 1–5 and visualized in Figure 1.

Data Validity

We addressed a common issue in inductive research whereby different authors interpret some terms and passages of informants differently. We were careful not to retrofit the data to service our theorizing. We avoided this by triangulating across analysts; as only one of the two authors had been involved in data collection, the second author was able to challenge and interrogate the other’s interpretations. The two co-authors engaged in in-depth discussion about how we had arrived at the data structure to reach a common understanding for developing consensual interpretations. Both authors discussed possible multiple interpretations in coding—such as activities that did not fit emergent theoretical categories or under-populated categories—until a consensus was reached; that is, the authors’ collective assessment that the differences in the independent assessments and developed theory were minimal. To further enhance the reliability of our interpretations, we asked another researcher knowledgeable in CSR to code a randomly selected subset of the data (15 interviews) to check for inter-coder reliability. We then compared the broad categories this researcher arrived at with our original codes. The agreement rate was 81.6 percent, and we discussed remaining disagreements until a common understanding was reached.

After completing the data analysis, we addressed data validity to ensure that what we found made sense to others. We composed two short essays (one in German and one in English) about the different social issue-selling moves we found and published these in practitioner-oriented magazines. We sent them to all of our informants, thanking them for their participation in our study and asking for feedback. The responses we received included comments such as, “*the tactics you discovered indeed reflect my work experience*” (informant 24), or “*you nailed it—this mirrors my daily reality*” (informant 41). Although this does not allow us to claim that what we discovered is exhaustive and all-encompassing, we took it as important evidence that our findings adequately reflect what is going on when middle managers attempt to sell social issues internally. Notably, what we found in our data represents what

TABLE 1
Motivation and Self-Perception

Sample Interview Excerpts	First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Theme	Aggregate Dimension
<i>There are a lot of things that need to change. But you need a lot of time to get the idea of sustainability into the minds of people, in terms of their values, and corporate culture. We are working hard on this, but it needs patience. (15-1)</i>	Need for change in values and culture	Motivation to promote social issues	Motivation and self-perception
<i>Awareness for these [CSR] issues is not yet as extensive as I would like to have it. For many, it [CSR] is just a marketing or communications function. But I don't think it should be like that. (24-2)</i>	Dissatisfaction with status quo	Motivation to promote social issues	Motivation and self-perception
<i>To make a real turn to sustainability possible, we need to motivate people, get them excited and capture them. It needs a shift in attitude, in our company, and in many others. (2-2)</i>	Dissatisfaction with current attitude to CSR	Motivation to promote social issues	Motivation and self-perception
<i>We have the CSR people that often act out of conviction on the one side, and on the other side we have the functional managers who more likely think in terms of performance or efficiency. (30-2)</i>	Distinguish CSR from functional manager	Internal role as change agent	Motivation and self-perception
<i>Well, what we often do is interfere with well-rehearsed processes. And in addition we ask: "Well, look, you have this old product here, there is an opportunity to make this differently." (11-2)</i>	Challenger of established routines	Internal role as change agent	Motivation and self-perception

CSR managers considered to be prescriptions about how they would ideally sell social issues. None of the CSR managers were fully satisfied with the way social issues were accepted in their respective organizations and the moves they described were pathways that they expected would be important for successfully selling social issues. This was partially based on past experience and partially on what the managers thought would be necessary to get certain messages across. Therefore, in the findings section, we present both forward- and backward-looking statements.

Next, we present our findings. Tables 1–5 depict the trajectories from sample interview excerpts to first-order concepts to second-order themes to aggregate dimensions. These tables also include interview quotes to further illustrate each theme. Quotes used in the text and tables are coded with anonymized interview and phase numbers (for example, interview number 1, phase 1 = 1-1).

FINDINGS: MOTIVATION, ASPIRATIONS, AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF ISSUE SELLERS

Our findings offer a new way of looking at issue selling that has not yet been adequately conceptualized. We found that the social context, relationships, how sellers perceive “who their buyers are,” and how they then engage with them matter a great deal—probably more than the literature has previously assumed. First, our informants consistently reported that the social nature of the issue

influenced their motivation and self-perception to sell these issues. As we will show, CSR managers saw themselves as change agents akin to what has been described as “tempered radicals” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) or “internal activists” (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015) in organizational contexts. We found that this required social issue sellers to draw on more subtle ways of selling their issues, including being tempered in aspirations to not overwhelm buyers with incomprehensible issues. We describe these traits in detail in the first section of our findings and group them as “motivation and self-perception” of issue sellers as well as “tempered aspirations” in the CSR context, addressing the question why social issue sellers engage in the issue-selling process and with potential issue buyers in the first place.

Second, we found that to sell social issues, sellers draw on a repertoire of engagement strategies that facilitate the acceptance of specific social issues. To gradually build relationships with buyers, issue sellers accumulate internal influence to leverage their weak organizational positions by drawing on the support of likeminded others; they attempt to persuade buyers of the presumably contested social value of the issue in question by appealing to the emotions of buyers, justifying not only on economic, but also on normative grounds; and issue sellers use different issue-selling strategies that “take perspective” (Parker & Axtell, 2001) on buyers’ heterogeneous worldviews and opinions about the issue. We describe these three engagement strategies in the second section of our

TABLE 2
Tempered Aspirations

Sample Interview Excerpts	First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Theme	Aggregate Dimension
<i>Being hard-headed will lead to failure. You have to show that there are not only risks, but also chances. (11-2)</i>	Being modest	Inward-looking	Tempered aspirations
<i>What many CSR managers get wrong is that they spend too much time with all those super-abstract “save-the-planet” issues. But they don’t engage with the daily problems of line-workers. (3-2)</i>	Don’t get lost in the big picture	Inward-looking	Tempered aspirations
<i>That’s a clear example where you need to take away people’s fear of the change. (37-2)</i>	Take away fear	Outward-looking	Tempered aspirations
<i>My job is to seek mutual understanding for these issues among employees and to explain that we need to achieve this together. To convince them that, in the long term, it’s a really good idea to engage with those “green” topics. (39-1)</i>	Create mutual understanding	Outward-looking	Tempered aspirations
<i>Pushing CSR is more about having people realize that it’s important, and that they start acting by themselves, without forcing them. (20-2)</i>	Convince without coercion	Outward-looking	Tempered aspirations

findings, addressing the question how social issue sellers build relationships with buyers. Taken together, our observations suggest seeing social issue selling and the way issue sellers engage with buyers as a relational approach, which we then develop theoretically.

Motivation and Self-Perception of Social Issue Sellers

We first describe the motivation and self-perception of issue sellers that help to better understand why they engage in social issue selling and interact with issue buyers in the first place (see Table 1). Initial motivation appears to be a combination of dissatisfaction with the existing situation and an assessment of issue sellers’ own role.

Dissatisfaction with the status quo. Informants expressed dissatisfaction with existing habits and routines that pervade their organizational contexts. CSR managers identified several issues that they felt were unsustainable, unethical, or not sufficiently socially responsible and, therefore, needed to be changed toward more socially oriented issues. One interviewee emphasized this by highlighting that, as CSR managers:

... we need to address the habits of our people. People have to change the way they think about this [CSR]; they need to overcome their weaker selves. (2-2)

Importantly, this awareness of having to address people’s habits and routines was connected to dissatisfaction with how things were currently organized. In other words, a strong source of motivation for informants was their feeling of unease with the

level of importance that their company currently gave to social issues.

The CSR topic still lags behind. We have a few things, like separating waste, or paying equal wages to men and women. But I think that people often don’t see that there is much potential to do more. But often no one cares. (54-2)

Similarly, another informant explained the objective of their daily work, linking this to how CSR managers see their own role in the company:

You need to get people to change their daily habits and routines, what they are used to, if you want to change something. Maybe we are something like “crusaders by conviction” [Überzeugungstäter in German]. (37-2)

It seems that the subtle frustration of the CSR managers with the current organizational status quo was not seen as a reason to resign, but rather as a strong incentive that kept these agents going and enhanced their conviction that what they were doing was the right thing and important. This seems to provide social issue sellers with the motivation they need for engaging in social change projects in the first place.

Self-perception as change agent. The CSR managers showed a self-perception that reflected their internal role as being responsible for selling social issues and thereby steering the organization toward “better” and more socially responsible behavior. One informant described the function of the CSR department as the organization’s “social conscience”:

I think that a CSR department is something like an internal NGO. (37-2)

TABLE 3
Accumulating Internal Influence

Sample Interview Excerpts	First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Theme	Aggregate Dimension
<i>It's important to have people who are interested in these topics and where you can build up a personal relationship. (20-2)</i>	Build network	Win internal allies	<i>Accumulate internal influence</i>
<i>We established "sustainability-champions" in the company. People signed up voluntarily, and that's a really important multiplier to motivate others and to establish the business relevance of CSR for the different departments. (45-2)</i>	Identify supportive multipliers	Win internal allies	<i>Accumulate internal influence</i>
<i>You have to acknowledge that selling social issues implies tremendous organizational change, because you bring it to the functional units, to risk management and procurement. This takes time and you need to convince each and every one. What we did is to work with the people behind the jobs; we created sustainability satellites, who cherish the topic and push it further. (38-2)</i>	Identify supportive multipliers	Win internal allies	<i>Accumulate internal influence</i>
<i>My experience is that if you want to achieve something, first do a pilot and test whether it works. That only costs a tenth [of the full project] and helps you get everyone on board. (14-2)</i>	Establish pilot projects	Achieve small wins	<i>Accumulate internal influence</i>
<i>Sometimes you have to be a bit opportunistic; don't take the line of most resistance and then become frustrated. No, take the line of least resistance and then work your way through. (3-2)</i>	Take line of least resistance	Achieve small wins	<i>Accumulate internal influence</i>

The role of such an internal NGO was considered a critical component that questioned the firm's current practices and their perceived sustainability, and which most other departments would be less likely to perform in a systematic way. Another interviewee reflected on how she saw herself differently than most other "conventional" managers in the company, highlighting the importance of having empathy and making people excited about social issues, rather than just pointing to their instrumental or technical value:

Yes, I could call myself Mrs. Altruistic, and therefore I am aware that I need to enthrall our managers to get them on board. (52-2)

In sum, we found that social issue sellers show a high degree of empathy and intrinsic drive to do what they think is the right thing. CSR managers experience ambivalence in a role that is tied to their desire to promote more socially responsible issues while also contributing to the fulfillment of more general organizational objectives. Importantly, even though our informants had diverse educational and professional backgrounds, their "prosocial motivation" (Grant & Berry, 2011) seems to unite them and give them a common sense of identity. One informant bluntly described what she considered a unifying feature of her CSR manager colleagues:

The "asshole factor"—excuse my language—among this group of people is not as high as amongst other groups! Because they all, or at least most, are united by their intrinsic goal of saving the planet. (27-2)

Despite their distinctive prosocial motivation to push for social change, issue sellers, however, tried to get their message across in a modest and incremental way as reflected in their aspirations in promoting social issues.

Tempered Aspirations

CSR managers considered it important to have *tempered aspirations* (see Table 2). Their tempered approach is both "inward looking" by tempering aspirations in driving change, and "outward looking" by being moderate about expectations that others will accept the social issues and be willing to change. Issue sellers seem to acknowledge that the social nature of the issue in question—more so than "nonsocial" issues, where the technical and economic value are usually clearer to understand—puts them into a distinct position in which they must take a step-by-step approach.

Inward-looking aspirations. One informant emphasized the need to temper his aspirations regarding the dissatisfaction about what he perceived as unsustainable habits and routines and his resulting desire to promote social issues as follows:

You must not be too convinced, because an excessive conviction can also be destructive. You have to recognize the limits, and then to identify how to bring the organization, and the people, to these limits. (52-2)

Such a statement is interesting because it challenges a common view that some change projects, particularly those related to social and sustainability issues, require a somewhat "grandiose" vision of a better world and must be accompanied by radical change in behavior. Although this idea itself may be contested,

TABLE 4
Establishing Proximity

Sample Interview Excerpts	First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Theme	Aggregate Dimension
<i>To really get some emotional attachment to sustainability, you have to make a personal connection and attribute some sort of responsibility for it. (53-2)</i>	Show personal involvement	Establish <i>emotional</i> proximity	<i>Establish proximity</i>
<i>What shouldn't be underemphasized is that CSR topics can provide meaning to employees, and this promotes initiative to pick things up from the bottom up. They feel that they can contribute to the long-term sustainability of the company. (47-2)</i>	Show personal involvement	Establish <i>emotional</i> proximity	<i>Establish proximity</i>
<i>You have to include people in a dialog; that's important. For instance, we organize workshops with different divisions and try to answer the questions: What does sustainability mean for you guys? What can you contribute? (51-1)</i>	Engage in dialog to explain issues	Establish <i>functional</i> proximity	<i>Establish proximity</i>
<i>I think that we still have to break down the relevance of CSR for the different functional units. We may talk to top management about sustainable sourcing of vanilla in Madagascar, but what does that mean for our blue-collars? Then the metalworker will of course ask me, "What does this have to do with me?" So what we still need to do is go down to the factory floor and show them what is relevant for CSR, like saving energy, using protective clothing, etc. (47-2)</i>	Break issues down	Establish <i>functional</i> proximity	<i>Establish proximity</i>
<i>When trying to sell CSR, you should not come with some broad vision and noble goals, but break it down to the specific business unit, procurement, finance, or whatever. (49-1)</i>	Break issues down	Establish <i>functional</i> proximity	<i>Establish proximity</i>

CSR managers seemed to support an opposing view; they felt that to successfully sell social issues, it is more important to show a small but tangible picture of change, instead of a big but intangible view. Another informant supported this interpretation by reflecting on the role of ideology:

You shouldn't be too much driven by your own ideologies, because it's definitely a problem rather than helping! (11-2)

It appears that social issue sellers need to walk a thin line with regard to being intrinsically motivated about the importance of social issues and having a high degree of empathy, but at the same time not showing too much of their prosocial motivation toward issue buyers. This inward-looking stance concurred with an outward-looking stance where CSR managers were careful not to overwhelm potential issue buyers with social responsibilities.

Outward-looking aspirations. The tempered aspirations toward others became visible when issue sellers aimed to convince issue buyers of the importance of CSR. One informant noted that it is important to be patient and to acknowledge people's limited cognitive capacity to engage with new and often unfamiliar social issues:

What about those who are not really excited about sustainability? Well, constant dripping wears away the stone! You need to be patient. Bring the topic up regularly, so in the end people will acknowledge that it's important. (51-1)

Another informant added that he needed to temper himself in terms of not confronting potential issues buyers with something that would require a complete turnaround from what they used to do, and instead taking an incremental approach that would gradually build acceptance for the issue.

We have to develop new topics slowly, so that when we confront divisions with it, it's not that they have never heard about it and there is a complete lack of understanding. It's a step-by-step process. For instance, a biodiversity guideline is acceptable in Europe, but in the US it's still a no-go topic. (30-2)

In sum, having tempered aspirations includes modestly rejecting current practices, working toward change in attitudes of issue buyers with regard to the social component, and simultaneously demonstrating the benefits of untapped alternatives. In doing so, CSR managers seek to avoid being dismissed as troublemakers that are adversarial to the company's survival, while simultaneously reducing the fear of change.

Engagement Strategies of Social Issue Sellers

Based on their self-perception as social change agents and their tempered aspirations they impose on themselves as a basis for engagement, we next describe how this influences the way social issue sellers interact with buyers. We found that issue sellers draw

TABLE 5
Adapting to Issue Buyers' Worldviews

Sample Interview Excerpts	First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Theme	Aggregate Dimension
<i>You are only successful in integrating sustainability thinking in fields like procurement, marketing, or HR if you manage to identify and understand their respective driver logics, and cater your solutions to them. (49-1)</i>	Provide catered solutions	Identify worldviews	<i>Adapt to issue buyers' worldviews</i>
<i>My job is to build an argumentative chain that clearly shows the relevance of CSR, but to do that I need to find out what the drivers of the different people and divisions are, what would motivate them to engage in CSR. (49-1)</i>	Provide catered solutions	Identify worldviews	<i>Adapt to issue buyers' worldviews</i>
<i>What I meant is that you need to put yourself in the shoes of your conversation partner. So, for instance, arguing with a lawyer is much different than arguing with someone from compliance or sales. (24-2)</i>	Flexible argumentation	Speak language of issue buyer	<i>Adapt to issue buyers' worldviews</i>
<i>You have to try things out, and put all the arguments in favor of sustainability on the table, but strategically. What about reputation, attracting talent, modernizing the company, etc.? Sometimes the fish bites. (6-2)</i>	Flexible argumentation	Speak language of issue buyer	<i>Adapt to issue buyers' worldviews</i>
<i>We found closed doors when approaching the legal department. There we had to do a lot of convincing, because they tend to see the world in black and white. A more positive example is with procurement, where we used to find closed doors as well, but now have a good working relationship with them. The same goes for compliance, but there is a somewhat natural link to CSR. And our environmental department of course! (24-2)</i>	Strategic framing	Speak language of issue buyer	<i>Adapt to issue buyers' worldviews</i>

on a repertoire of engagement strategies to build relationships with buyers. First, issue sellers seek to accumulate internal influence and build a network of likeminded others to leverage their relatively weak positions in the organizational hierarchy. Second, issue sellers seek to establish not only physical proximity through building personal networks with colleagues to which they can reach out and talk to, but also psychological proximity between issues and potential buyers by drawing on the emotional and functional appeal of specific social issues. Third, issue sellers adapt to buyers' worldviews about the issues' social nature to evoke buyers' positive evaluations.

First engagement strategy: accumulating internal influence. Accumulating internal influence includes two interrelated approaches (see Table 3). First, social issue sellers seek to "win internal allies." To do so, they aim to find other actors in their organizational contexts who share their socially orientated character in support of social issues. Second, social issue sellers seek to accumulate something akin to Weick's "small-wins" approach: promoting issues in a piecemeal way is considered more effective than confronting organizational members with threateningly overwhelming chunks (Weick, 1984).

Winning internal allies. Social issue sellers emphasized the importance of creating a network of internal allies who supported social issues. In trying

to win their colleagues for CSR-related change projects, the issue sellers shifted the selling of social issues from an individual to a collective effort. One informant described this as follows:

Some people are receptive, and others are not. That's why you have to form alliances with your colleagues, because alone you can't achieve much. (11-2)

Another respondent reflected about the need to form informal networks of likeminded people to promote social issues:

If you want to successfully integrate CSR topics in the company, you need to build up a network of people who know the company, and whom you know. Informally chatting with other colleagues helps a lot to get concessions. (51-1)

Similarly, one CSR manager indicated that to overcome skepticism about the usefulness of social issues, it was necessary to have fellow campaigners who "cherished" the issue in question and leveraged the empathy that we found among the CSR managers.

In sum, winning internal allies that supported social issues was seen as a critical starting point for issue sellers to evoke change and to leverage their relatively "weak" positions in the organizational hierarchy (Daudigeos, 2013). Although this raises an interesting concept regarding the creation of

FIGURE 1

Inductive Reasoning Process—Motivation, Aspirations, and Engagement Strategies of Social Issue Sellers

a “social issue-selling movement” inside organizations, respondents equally emphasized that CSR managers must strive for continuous small and incremental wins, rather than occasional large ones.

Accumulating small wins. Social issue sellers considered it important to gather evidence that social issues were not detrimental to the organization’s primary (that is, financial) objectives. To do so, issue sellers began by “picking the low-hanging fruits.” These were issues that were relatively easy to understand and could be easily aligned with existing goals and routines, for instance, by quantifying their contribution to organizational performance. This was often done by setting up pilot projects:

You have to invade the system and, basically, establish flagship projects to give people an orientation. And then scale it up. (39-1)

Similarly, one CSR manager explained that she was strategic but subtle about the timing of launching a particular pilot project, which relates to the other approach of winning allies and stimulating change projects incrementally.

Sometimes, you have to be at the right place at the right time, and talk to the right people. Often you can’t plan everything, so projects need to rest in the drawer for a while, and then you need to pull them out when the time has come. (49-1)

Approaching social issue selling with a small wins strategy thus seems to enable CSR managers to realize a series of modest victories by tackling a limited number of small problems one by one and to avoid overwhelming buyers with an issue that is perceived as overly complex and unwieldy and may fill people with anxiety.

Second engagement strategy: establishing proximity to social issues. Our data suggest that one important strategy issue sellers draw on is to distinguish between what we call the *emotional* and the *functional* appeal of a social issue. When addressing the emotional level, issue sellers explain to their counterparts how the latter’s personal behavior may not be fully socially responsible and what impact this will have for their personal lives. Informants considered this an important line of reasoning that they used to convince buyers that certain issues were important. At the same time, social issue sellers drew on the functional level by explaining how specific job tasks of a potential issue buyer were not fully socially responsible (for example, the buying decisions of a procurement manager). Issue sellers tried to establish proximity between the business context of a particular issue buyer (another manager, department, or job function) and a specific social issue (such as greenhouse gas emissions or working

standards in supplier factories). This was considered important to explain exactly what the social impact of a certain task was that needed to change.

Establishing emotional proximity. Informants reported that it was important to establish emotional proximity between potential issue buyers and a particular social issue to create a feeling of personal responsibility (for instance, factory workers’ sense of personal security when handling hazardous materials in line with health and safety standards). One respondent highlighted the difficulties that CSR managers often faced when trying to convey social issues and its relevance for specific decision makers in the organization:

Often you hear things like, “What do I have to do with that? How does this relate to me? I don’t understand it, I don’t want to hear it, I don’t care.” (39-1)

Several informants emphasized that, to overcome a lack of interest or even straightforward renunciation of social issues, it helped to appeal to emotions that could be associated with the social issue in question:

When transporting these messages, we also try to take the emotional approach, and not just the business approach. (46-2)

More precisely, CSR managers felt that taking the emotional approach was very helpful in terms of getting people excited, or at least concerned, about previously untapped alternatives that their day-to-day work activities entailed. One informant highlighted the need to stimulate people’s convictions about social issues:

You need to reach people personally and individually. You can paint the big picture and talk about benefits for the whole company, but to really get people excited, you need to stimulate their personal conviction that it’s important. (52-2)

Appealing to the emotional level facilitated creating mutual understanding among employees for social issues such as CSR, and eased their acceptance, even if the social issue’s technical value remained contested. CSR managers aimed for people to bring up the social issues because they were convinced that it was the right thing to do.

What shouldn’t be underemphasized is that CSR topics can provide meaning to employees, and this promotes initiative to pick things up from the bottom up. They feel that they can contribute to the long-term sustainability of the company. (47-2)

Similarly, it was emphasized that social issues allowed an active emotional attachment to an issue, which was seen as effective for buyers to become intrinsically motivated.

Having economic arguments is of course important, but you need this emotional component; that opens so many doors. I mean, people have an intrinsic motivation to deal with sustainability. You have won if they say: "Okay, I think this is important because it's close to my heart and it will help save the planet." (11-2)

However, we also found that addressing emotional appeal for a social issue alone was not sufficient. In addition to some of the difficulties we reported earlier, social issue sellers stressed that they needed to establish functional proximity between a social issue and the daily habits and routines of those they wanted to buy the issue.

Establishing functional proximity. Our informants reported that the emotional approach had to be complemented with a "functional" approach, in which issue sellers explained what the social issues of individual job functions in need for change were, independent of personal feelings that employees involved might have. One informant described this as follows:

We need to spell out what the sustainability aspect of each and every function is. In practice, that means that we sit together with the colleagues from law, compliance, HR, etc. and discuss with them what the relevant issues are for them in terms of sustainability. It's important not to create an artificial world that nobody understands, but to concretely point out the business relevance. (18-2)

Our data show that social issue sellers felt that a more successful approach was to work toward incremental change, achieve small wins, and clearly show the business relevance of specific social issues, instead of promoting an overwhelming vision of a "better world" that remained incomprehensible for organizational members with regard to their daily work practices. In their relationship with buyers, issue sellers identified the establishment of emotional and functional proximity as a critical component that facilitated the social issues' acceptance.

Third engagement strategy: adapting to issue buyers' worldviews. Although the strategy of establishing proximity was used to create a feeling of shared responsibility of issue sellers and buyers and reflects sellers' attempts of making buyers engage with an issue, the related strategy of adapting to worldviews was more about triggering buyers to positively evaluate specific social issues and framing possible responses into the desired direction. To do so, issue sellers pay

a great deal of attention to what buyers might think about the social issue in question. The social context seemed to evoke relatively strong opinions among potential buyers about whether certain issues were necessary for an organization beyond their immediate instrumental value. It was these worldviews of issue buyers that sellers strived to identify and adapt their issue-selling strategies to (see Table 5).

As CSR managers reported, worldviews about social issues in particular tended to vary considerably.

When talking about sustainability, everyone has some sort of opinion about it. The mental frames are different for different persons. This makes it difficult to get into these frames, because everyone thinks of it differently. (53-2)

For issue sellers, this was most easily observable when looking at the departmental or functional backgrounds of issue buyers, such as marketing, accounting, or finance, but also depended on educational and personal backgrounds. Adapting to the worldviews of these buyers serves as an important mechanism that social issue sellers use to explain the need for a specific social issue in the language of those they want to buy the issue. This includes adapting to what they perceive as trigger mechanisms, motives, and incentives to which buyers might be responsive, to create a common understanding of a social issue and of a possible response.

Identifying heterogeneous worldviews. Informants consistently reported that the social nature of the issue they aimed to sell provided a unique context in which they had to adapt to the characteristics of issue buyers. For instance, issue sellers described the varying stances buyers had toward social issues based on their personalities.

What I always find interesting is that, with regard to CSR, you have so many different ways of seeing it. You have the greenie, who does it because of conviction. And then you have those who say, "Well, I really think it's esoteric, but if I integrate CSR I can sell more products and my customers want it, so why not?" You'll find all these characters. (6-2)

With regard to the issue buyers' functional background, informants pointed out how this was distinct among the various groups within the organization:

Everything that is "management" just doesn't work with moral convictions. You need the business case. For the blue-collar workers it's different; there you can much better argue that sustainability is "the right thing to do," because it reflects what they do at home as well. (52-2)

Having identified those perceptions, our informants emphasized that they needed to “speak the buyers’ language” and put themselves in the position of the potential buyers and communicate in a way that strategically addressed their motivations and incentives.

Speaking the language of issue buyers. Several informants emphasized the need to formulate their issue-selling messages in a way that issue buyers were able to comprehend. This extended not only to verbal communication, but also to how CSR managers themselves behaved and how they appeared in front of issue buyers:

You have to express yourself in a way to which your counterpart is used to and understands you. It has to fit into their worldview. That may be why I wear a suit and not run around like Jesus in my hippie-boots and play the missionary. (11-2)

Given the differing worldviews among different organizational members, adapting to counterparts’ worldviews also implies a tactical approach that depends on the CSR managers’ skills to connect to these different mindsets.

It depends on who my counterpart is. I have to be tactical in my argumentation. So, I have to be appreciative, but at the same time capture people where they can be captured. (6-2)

In sum, adapting to issue buyers’ worldviews describes a process in which issue sellers proactively try to identify buyers’ heterogeneous worldviews with regard to a social issue. Subsequently, sellers transported the meaning and attached values of the issues they aimed to sell by speaking a language that catered to those counterparts’ preferences and cultural and social frames to evoke buyers’ positive evaluation of specific social issues. Figure 1 summarizes our inductive reasoning process.

Taken together, our findings suggest a relational approach to social issue selling and put the engagement between sellers and buyers in the issue-selling process into a new perspective that has not been adequately conceptualized in the literature. Next, we embed this relational approach in extant theorizing and show how it expands our understanding of social issue selling in several important directions.

TOWARD A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO SELLING AND BUYING SOCIAL ISSUES

Our findings present social issue selling as a relational endeavor based on the strong emphasis of sellers to strategically engage with buyers when pitching for social change. The data about the motivation and aspirations of issue sellers help explain

Author’s voice:

What was the most difficult or challenging aspect of this research project and paper?

why these actors engage in their change projects in the first place and which self-perception they have as a basis for their relationship with potential buyers. Based on the sellers’ interpretation of “who their buyers are,” the engagement strategies we uncovered describe how issue sellers then seek to build relationships with buyers and how this unfolds in the issue-selling process. The relational approach to social issue selling connects to and expands several extant theories that help to explain our empirical observations and that stimulate future research on the topic of social issue selling.

How Seller Motivation and Aspirations Influence Social Issue Selling

To answer the question of why social issue sellers engage in change projects and what motivates them to keep going despite internal resistance to change, one relevant stream of literature is the work on internal activism, tempered radicals, and social movement studies more generally (Alt & Craig, 2016; Scully & Segal, 2002; Zald & Berger, 1978). Whereas “outsider activism” has received the “lion’s share of research attention” in social movement studies (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016: 18), our findings make an important contribution to this literature by shedding light on “insider activism” among social issue sellers that see the CSR department and its members as an “*internal NGO*” (informant 37-2) challenging the status quo and, therefore, as something akin to Meyerson and Scully’s (1995: 586) “tempered radicals” in organizations; that is, “individuals who identify with and are committed to their organization, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization.” As Sonenshein et al. (2014: 8) noted, such prosocial characteristics are an important oversight in the issue-selling literature, “because social issue supporters are often strongly identified with an issue and thus are different from the general population, who might be on average more apathetic or indifferent toward the issue.” This is exactly what we found in our data among the CSR managers and how they perceived their counterparts.

The dissatisfaction of social issue sellers with current practices portrays them as internal activists working against some undesirable situation, while

simultaneously motivating them to drive social change (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). Their knowledge about the organization, including informal social structures, the prevailing culture and existing routines (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016) then provides them with a key strategic advantage to act as vital sources of incremental—rather than radical—progress on social issues. In doing so, CSR managers aim to promote alternative ideas and an internal transformation of their organizations. Some studies have focused on how internal activism influenced the spread of contentious issues that gradually became accepted by those who initially opposed them (Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Scully & Segal, 2002), but only a few studies in this area have paid attention to social issues, specifically CSR.

Seeing social issue sellers as internal activists is further supported by research that has examined the “prosocial motivation” of change agents (Grant & Berry, 2011). Prosocial motivation can be linked to CSR and social issues because, as psychological research suggests, “employees with high prosocial motivation are driven to produce ideas that are useful to future generations,” such as social and environmental sustainability (Grant & Berry, 2011: 78). Moreover, prosocially motivated employees are more inclined to build relationships with others. Based on motivated information processing theory, Grant and Berry (2011) show that prosocial motivation provides a positive moderating effect to take others’ perspectives and to determine what—in the case of issue selling—buyers would find useful. This characteristic of social issue sellers seems to be an important precondition for identifying buyer characteristics, building lasting and trustworthy relationships with them, and for engaging in the issue-selling approaches of establishing emotional and functional proximity, and adapting to the worldviews of buyers.

Hence, it seems that the prosocial motivation, and its effect on perspective taking, may have a higher salience among social issue sellers than among nonsocial issue sellers. The self-perception as being a tempered radical and having an intrinsic drive to push for social change may be less prevalent among “conventional” issue sellers, which suggests that the efforts of intense relationship building would be more present in social issue selling. Notably, we have not assumed that social issue sellers might not be motivated by instrumental reasons for instance to advance their careers, although many informants confirmed to us that they “*would probably make more money elsewhere in the company*” (informant 39-1). This point suggests that their prosocial motivation was indeed a key driver of change. Although the way in which they aimed to gradually build

relationships with buyers did not appear mutually exclusive with nonsocial issue selling, we found that the combination of their various moves paired with their own initial motivations was what set social issue sellers apart. This is where a combination of insights from different domains appears helpful to advance our understanding of social issue selling. Sonenshein et al. (2014) for instance combined insights from organizational sciences and psychology to examine the role of self-work for the motivation for issue-supportive behaviors of issue sellers; our study expands this perspective in important directions by demonstrating how insights from social movement studies help in understanding what issue sellers “do” to live up to their aspirations and to engage with issue buyers in pitching for social issues.

Explaining Seller Engagement Strategies

Relational knowledge, which involves “both a sense of whom to involve and a sense of how to motivate their involvement” (Dutton et al., 2001: 727), is of vital importance for issue sellers (Alt & Craig, 2016). This puts perspective taking at the center of attention, which, as we have argued earlier, is positively related to the prosocial motivation of issue sellers. Perspective taking is “a cognitive process in which individuals adopt others’ viewpoints in an attempt to understand their preferences, values, and needs” (Grant & Berry, 2011: 79; Parker & Axtell, 2001). Social issue sellers seem to be able to “consider information from multiple perspectives to a greater extent...[and] stimulate the processing of social information—information from and about relevant others” (de Dreu, 2006: 1248). Research in psychology and management suggests that prosocially motivated individuals are more likely than others to adopt the perspectives of a range of other people, including coworkers, supervisors, suppliers, customers, and clients (Parker & Axtell, 2001; see also Grant & Berry, 2011: 79). This suggests that social issue sellers are likely to see their selling moves as a relational endeavor in which they aim to create mutual understanding between sellers and buyers over time. Although this does not imply that social issue sellers have more of a prosocial motivation than conventional issue sellers do, our data do suggest that social issue sellers rely on a combination of personal motivation and the specific social issue context in which they operate that may require them to think more relationally than sellers of other types of issues.

This discussion of prosocial motivation and perspective taking leads to the role of language use in issue selling, particularly when issue sellers aim to adapt to the worldviews of issue buyers. Meyerson

(2001) has emphasized the importance of using language that is familiar and legitimate to organizational members when advocating change. Also, when sellers approach buyers in a contextualized manner to establish functional and emotional proximity to specific social issues, they aim to transmit their message in a way that resonates with buyers and is, therefore, “interesting” (Davis, 1971) to them. As Davis argued in his classic treatise, if the practical consequences of a concept (or issue) are not immediately apparent to an audience, “they will respond to it by rejecting its value until someone can concretely demonstrate its utility” (1971: 311).

The engagement strategies issue sellers use to overcome the inherent ambiguities and contested utility of social issues, and their relationship with buyers, can be understood as rhetorical strategies aimed at persuasion (Green, 2004). Building on Aristotle, Green (2004) elaborated a tripartite view on rhetorical justifications based on the notions of pathos, logos, and ethos. These notions conceptually underpin the issue-selling moves we found in our data. When establishing emotional proximity, issue sellers use pathos justifications as they draw on emotional appeals that “have the ability to grab an actor’s limited attention, excite the imagination, and direct behavior away from the status quo” (Green, 2004: 659). Depending on the sellers’ evaluation of the buyer, they also use logos justifications, which affect the counterparts’ sense of logic. This relates to what we described as functional proximity because logos justifications “tend to elicit methodical calculation of means and ends to achieve efficiency or effectiveness [and] justify action by appealing to the desire for efficient/effective action” (Green, 2004: 659–660). Issue sellers also use ethos justifications that appeal to ethical responsibilities, as was visible in their aim to connect to issue buyers’ worldviews, which were adaptive to ethical rationales to varying degrees. Ethos justifications rest on “judgments about whether a given activity benefits the evaluator, but rather on judgment about whether the activity is the ‘right thing to do’” (Suchman, 1995: 579).

These different rhetorical strategies are akin to what Sonenshein (2006) described as “issue crafting,” where actors intentionally adapt their language to shape recipients’ understanding of a particular issue. However, this work looked at how issue sellers perceive and manage possible discrepancies between their private understanding of a social issue and broader public perceptions, rather than at how they perceive the worldviews of issue buyers with whom they interact. We, therefore, extend this work in an important direction by demonstrating that the ability of issue sellers to draw on a range of rhetorical strategies when interacting with buyers seems to be

particularly pertinent for social issues. This is because those issues often depart from the common worldview of organizational members that follows the traditional economic paradigm and the primacy of shareholder value for business firms. How social issues contribute to organizational objectives is often not immediately clear, both to sellers and buyers. In consequence, social issue sellers appear to act more “humanely” in their approach.³

What our findings suggest is that when focusing on technical and economic motives, employees may operate in a more mechanistic way, whereas they might be operating more in a “humanistic” way when focusing on social issues such as CSR, meaning that they focus on the human condition and on human virtues in their selling strategies (Melé, 2003). Learning how social issue sellers operate then would not only be relevant to understand how social issues gain traction within organizations. It also provides further insight on how organizations integrate more relational aspects of management into their culture and in doing so become more responsive to the multiplicity of values and norms when operating in a globalized business environment.

In sum, the relational view on social issue selling that is characterized by empathy of sellers and relationship-building efforts to create mutual understanding of an issue is a departure from existing views of issue selling that focus on self-evaluations of issue sellers and on characteristics of an issue itself, such as its technical efficiency or its contribution to financially oriented organizational objectives. Dynamics at the individual level of analysis, the way in which sellers are able to take into account characteristics of buyers and how they subsequently interact all seem to have more importance than previously conceptualized and have important implications for future theorizing.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are two main implications for viewing social issue selling as a relational endeavor between sellers and buyers. First, it puts the social aspect of issues in a distinct light, which departs from studies that have examined selling moves for strategic or technical issues. Second, it focuses on the relationships between issue sellers and buyers, which directs attention away from characteristics of the issue itself toward those of actors involved in the selling process. In the following section, we reflect on the implications of our findings, both for the issue-selling and CSR literatures.

³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.

Emphasizing the “Social” in Issue Selling

Sonenshein (2006: 1158) argued that distinguishing social from nonsocial issues is “theoretically important, because [social issues] include issues often treated as less central to an organization’s strategy.” Our study sheds new light on this critical distinction. The relational approach provides a fresh perspective for examining how individuals construct justifications and issue-selling moves to shape social issues into more strategically oriented accounts, which are intended to resonate with the sellers’ and buyers’ personal as well as organizational objectives.

Although much previous research on issue selling has adopted a more strategic definition of issues that have a direct impact on the ability of an organization to meet its objectives (Alt & Craig, 2016), social issues present a different case. For social issues, including CSR, this immediate impact is usually less clear, as social issues serve society’s interests and improve social welfare and “can benefit the greater good, beyond wealth maximization, such as healthcare, poverty, or the natural environment” (Sonenshein, 2016: 349). Research on the link between CSR and financial performance supports this view as despite a vast body of research investigating the performance implications of socially responsible behavior, researchers have raised doubts about the immediate financial benefits of CSR (Crane et al., 2014). The difficulties that issue sellers experience in establishing the performance implications of social issues may be due to their characterization as “wicked problems” that are “not necessarily linked to the objectives of for-profit organizations, [and] may thus challenge sellers’ interpretations of contextual and target signals for selling” (Alt & Craig, 2016: 5). Our study picks up these theoretical arguments and advances a new perspective on how issue sellers adapt to individual preferences of buyers and about what those actors think makes a social issue important. We thereby expand the important groundwork of Bansal (2003), who showed that the framing of issues did not necessarily have to appeal only to immediate organizational objectives, but could also appeal to norms and values that are reflected in the worldviews of organizational members.

Future research taking a relational approach to issue selling thus should examine closely the interplay between normative and instrumental justifications for social issues. This distinction between normative and economic domains seems particularly pertinent when issues carry meaning that is not purely strategic or efficiency-based (Sonenshein, 2006). According to Sonenshein (2006: 1160), “the concept of a normative domain acknowledges that

individuals have personal values and beliefs about the world that influence their behavior.” This includes deontological principles in favor of arguments related to fairness, duties, and obligations, and appeals for “doing the right thing” more generally. When selling issues that carry primarily strategic or efficiency-based values, however, the economic domain dominates because it “accounts for the view that business organizations are often seen as economic institutions” (Sonenshein, 2006: 1160). Hence, the economic domain reflects appeals to the financial consequences of an issue, such as profitability. We concur with the view that “normative and economic domains [...] are often viewed as representing opposing spheres of legitimacy, with the economic domain representing the objective, rational, and business-oriented view and the normative domain representing the subjective, value-laden, and moral view” (Sonenshein, 2006: 1160). The relational approach we portrayed thus advances the idea that social issue selling is characterized by a dynamic interplay between economic and normative rationales, where it is up to the sellers to strike a balance that best reflects issue buyers’ preferences, and that this balance needs to gradually be adjusted in relational interactions. It also highlights the skills of issue sellers that are necessary for rhetorically shaping justifications for social issues.

Our work that portrays social issue sellers as “moral agents” in organizations also pushes extant research forward that has examined personal characteristics of social issue sellers and demonstrated how this type of socially conscious manager may be distinct from “conventional” managers (Hemingway & MacLagan, 2004; Strand, 2013; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). Wright and Nyberg (2012) for instance showed that CSR managers tend to have strong, socially oriented personalities and empathy to promote their agenda, and therefore, often find themselves torn between conflicting economic and social, environmental, or ethical rationales. At the same time, these managers are probably more likely than conventional managers—such as those in PR, marketing, or finance—to be dissatisfied with “business-as-usual” in their respective companies in cases where such behavior is perceived as socially or environmentally irresponsible, or unethical. Indeed, research suggests that CSR managers frequently struggle to promote their social or environmental objectives internally. Their work often results in skepticism and even fierce opposition from their colleagues, who may consider them a threat to profitability and the business’s core interests (Haack et al., 2012). We expand this perspective by showing how social issue sellers use relationship building as a key exercise to overcome such internal opposition.

Social Issue Selling at the Individual Level of Analysis

Our findings emphasize the importance of intra-organizational dynamics when looking at the individual level of analysis. We portray middle managers as key agents driving social issue selling. We found that social change initiatives such as CSR are largely determined by “lateral” and “middle-down” issue-selling moves of sellers directed at buyers, where both parties often hold middle-managerial positions. It is important to focus more on these dynamics, rather than limit attention to interactions with top management, because issue sellers, and the way they interpret, translate and frame issues internally to sell them, are critical components that shape how organizations ultimately adopt social issues. Looking at the difficulties involved in social issue selling also helps to better understand why business firms frequently struggle to create social impact. It appears that issue sellers’ authority—or lack thereof—is not enough reason for issue buyers, located either at similar or lower hierarchical levels, to buy and accept an issue. Instead, we found that social issue sellers rely on a host of fairly mundane moves. Thus, what individuals do, how they realize opportunities and maneuver through social constraints such as scarce resources or power, seems just as important as top-management decisions about the strategic direction of an organization. This is particularly pertinent in the case of CSR and allegations of greenwashing, where top-management decisions to strategically address social issues often remain decoupled from core organizational processes if managerial buy-in throughout the organization is not secure (Haack et al., 2012). Therefore, endogenous and organization-specific factors at the level of individual actions should be examined more closely (Wang et al., 2016), as they may either prevent or foster decoupling as well as the co-existence of responsible and irresponsible behavior in an organization (see Whiteman & Cooper, 2016). In this way, we make an important contribution to the CSR literature by uncovering the internal process of creating CSR-related momentum in an organization, based on how CSR managers work.

This perspective also complements studies that have examined CSR implementation in practices and procedures (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Wickert et al., 2016), but have remained largely at the organizational level of analysis. Those studies omit important dynamics at the individual level and the “foundations of CSR that are based on individual action and interaction” (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012: 956) and, therefore, struggle to explain variation in CSR

implementation among and also within corporations. However, as Aguinis and Glavas (2012: 953) argued, “although CSR takes place at the organizational level, individual actors are those who actually strategize, make decisions, and execute CSR initiatives.” Those authors called for more research into individual actors’ interpretations of CSR and how this influences the way CSR-related issues are sold and ultimately accepted by organizational members. Future research should also take a closer look at the nature of the organizational role of CSR managers (Risi & Wickert, 2017; Strand, 2013). Although our informants were CSR managers with broad and more strategic responsibility who had a rather holistic perspective on social issues, research suggests that as organizations advance in the implementation of CSR, they use more specialized managers with specific operational responsibilities (Risi & Wickert, 2016). This leads to a separation of issues related for instance to health and safety, eco-efficiency, or sustainable sourcing. Moving from the broad perspective of issue sellers, we observed toward more specialized jobs and concomitant more “narrowly” defined social issues may induce sellers to use different moves and relational strategies than what we found.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As with most qualitative work, our study has certain limitations, including claims of generalizability. The robustness and applicability to other geographical or sociocultural contexts may need further thought. Scholars could nuance the issue-selling moves we have portrayed and look for additions we did not detect and examine whether the selling moves we found are applied differently depending on industry sector, firm size, ownership structure, or to what extent they are mediated by personality traits of the CSR manager or by education, seniority, or gender. Longitudinal studies such as ethnographies could delve deeper into the dynamics of social issue selling and, for instance, unpack how the relationship between sellers and buyers unfolds and possibly changes over time, and what makes it stable or unstable. Golan and Bamberger (2015), for instance, found that employee helping—a type of prosocial behavior—and the dyadic relationship between help-seeker and help-giver change over time and is highly dynamic with different levels of intensity. In

Author’s voice:

If you were able to do this study again, what if anything would you do differently?

the context of issue selling, this calls for future research to examine how issue sellers might constantly reevaluate their moves and engagement strategies in a sequence of encounters with buyers, who might in turn be tactical in their responsiveness to sellers. In addition to this, multilevel studies are theoretically important as they may shed light on how contextual factors beyond individual relationships may influence the selling of social issues.

In our study, we have focused on examining the “natives’ point of view”; in other words, what CSR managers as issue sellers perceive as adequate approaches for selling social issues. However, the effectiveness of their approach in actually evoking organizational change and managerial buy-in should be further researched. This is because our primary knowledge interest in this study was what Habermas (1971) described as “practical-hermeneutic” aimed at improving “mutual understanding” (Willmott, 2003: 95), rather than a technical interest aimed at prediction and control. Therefore, we faced a trade-off regarding the examination of cause–effect relations. Because of the interpretive nature and paradigmatic boundaries of this research, our main aim was to provide a detailed understanding of internal processes from the point of view of the involved actors and how they create meaning about social issues. Future research that leans more toward a positivistic paradigm could build on our findings and establish causal relations between the application of different issue-selling moves and social change-related outcomes; for instance, whether an issue has materialized into a formal rule or whether social impact has actually been achieved.

Overall, we hope that the relational approach to social issue selling we offer can provide valuable starting points for future empirical research and theorizing into the dynamics of issue selling. It is important to understand these dynamics because doing so may ultimately help organizations to create more positive social impact.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDELINE—PHASE II

Opening question

1. Can you please explain how the implementation of CSR takes place in the company?
 - a. In case it is not picked up by informant: What was your specific role therein?

Main questions

2. Can you please describe the major challenges that a CSR professional commonly faces?
 - a. Please describe the core competencies a CSR professional needs.
3. Please explain which actors are involved in the implementation of CSR. Which goals do they pursue, and what are their incentives and motives?
4. Please describe the biggest conflicts and barriers you confronted. Which aspects complicate the interaction and collaboration with other actors?
5. How do you convince other managers of the importance of implementing CSR?
6. If you think back, what were the major events and decisions (or milestones) in relation to your company's stance to CSR? How did this impact the implementation of CSR?
7. Please describe the most important tasks that you/the CSR department is involved in.
8. How is putting CSR into practice different from implementing other strategies or management concepts?
9. Do you meet with other CSR professionals? Please describe how such interaction is usually done.

Concluding question

10. How do you see the future of CSR professionals? Please provide some examples.