SALESPERSONS' MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT IN BUYER–SELLER RELATIONSHIPS

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Given differing organizational needs and goals, underlying conflicts and tensions are an inherent part of buyer–seller relationships. This research presents and tests a conceptual framework examining the effect of the type of conflict (affective and task) in the relationship, the conflict management approaches used by the salesperson, and the subsequent quality of the buyer–seller relationship. The framework is tested using surveys completed by 235 salespeople in three industries. The survey results provide new insights on how salespeople can use conflict management behaviors to cope better with task and affective conflict and improve relationship quality with buyers.

The nature of buyer–seller relationships has been changing for some time, away from simple transactions with a multitude of partners toward longer-term relationships with a select few (Kalwani and Narayandas 1995; Weitz and Bradford 1999). Such long-term relationships develop mutually beneficial outcomes and are characterized by mutual trust, open communication, common goals, commitment to mutual gain, and organizational support (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sallee and Flaherty 2003). To achieve this level of relationship quality, salespeople and customers go beyond simply trusting each other to making mutually beneficial and risky investments in their relationships.

Salespeople, acting as relationship managers, play a key role in the development and management of these partnering relationships (Beverland 2001; Biong and Selnes 1996; Frankwick, Porter, and Crosby 2001; Landry, Arnold, and Arndt 2005; Tellefsen and Eyuboglu 2002; Weitz and Bradford 1999). In contrast to the concept of a clear boundary between a firm and its faceless environment, this relationship perspective emphasizes the role of boundary spanners (salespeople and buyers) who conduct and influence much of the reality of their relationships (Thorelli 1986). While the selling literature has focused on the nature of buyer–seller relationships and the relationship development process (e.g., Jackson 1985; Weitz and Bradford 1999), little research has been done on specific conflict management behaviors used by salespeople that lead to effective buyer–seller relationships (for exception, see Ganesan 1993).

The research presented here develops and tests a framework that examines a key aspect of relationship building—the management of conflict. Prior research on conflict management in buyer–seller and channel relationships describes how factors such as power, dependency, the depth and breadth of conflict, and relational norms are related to the use of different conflict management approaches and negotiation strategies (Dant and Schul 1992; Ganesan 1993). In contrast, we examine how the use of different conflict management approaches when dealing with different types of conflict can improve buyer–seller relationships. The focus of this research is the appropriate use of conflict management behavior in response to different conflict types, not on the direct effects of conflict and conflict management behaviors on relationship quality.

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict management is an important skill for salespeople who manage relationships (Biong and Selnes 1996; Tellefsen and Eyuboglu 2002; Weitz and Bradford 1999). Developing relationships provides considerable benefit for both buyer and seller, but it also comes with some unexpected costs. As the scope of interactions between buyers and sellers broadens and intensifies, conflicts are likely to arise due to increased interdependences (Dahrendorf 1959; Lewin 1947; Thomas 1976). For instance, customers in long-term relationships are

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also the most challenging to serve satisfactorily because they are sensitive to and significantly affected by inadequacies on the part of the selling companies and salespeople upon whom they depend (Jackson 1985). Also, as companies in partnering relationships become closer to each other, relationship norms play a critical role and transgressions to these rules are treated more seriously (Roloff and Cloven 1990). Although much of the research in the channels literature treats conflict as a negative outcome, understanding the sources of conflict and options for best managing it can produce positive effects on buyer–seller relationships (Johanson and Mattsson 1987).

The Nature of Conflict

Conflict involves the interdependence of two parties. It arises when one party obstructs, interferes, impedes, blocks, frustrates, or makes less effective the behavior of the other (Deutsch 1973; Gaski 1984; Stern, El-Ansary, and Coughlan 1996). In conflict, the actions of one party must at least have the potential to affect the ability of the other party to reach its goals. Consequently, conflict is considered to be the overt behaviors or feelings that occur in response to the interference in the accomplishment of a goal (Pondy 1967; Raven and Kruglanski 1970; Stern, El-Ansary, and Coughlan 1996; Wall and Callister 1995).

Conflict has commonly been viewed as a multidimensional construct and extant research often makes a distinction between task (cognitive) and emotional (affective) conflict (e.g., Amason 1996; Jehn 1992, 1997). Jehn (1995) demonstrated, through in-depth interviews, that both of these dimensions often occur in business contexts. Task conflict involves disagreement over how to accomplish the tasks undertaken by two parties (e.g., Jehn 1992; 1997). This type of conflict dimension has also been termed *cognitive conflict* (e.g., Amason 1996) or *systemic or structural incompatibilities* (e.g., Wilkoff and Selsky 1995).

A second conflict dimension is not task related but typically involves interpersonal incompatibilities that cause friction between two people (Amason 1996; Burnett 1993; Jehn 1995, 1997; Shapiro and Rosen 1994). This dimension that we call affective conflict is also termed *emotional conflict* (e.g., Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin 1999) or *relationship conflict* (e.g., Jehn 1995, 1997).

Effects of Conflict

Conflict in buyer–seller relationships has been typically, though not exclusively, associated with negative consequences. For example, research has found that conflict can make buyers less receptive to the ideas presented by sellers, can take time and energy away from the pursuit of business goals, and can cause restricted and distorted flows of information (Brown 1983; Jehn 1992). However, it is important to appreciate that conflict, when handled effectively, can also function to affect business relationships positively (e.g., Xie, Song, and Stringfellow 1998). For example, conflict can serve as a medium through which problems can be aired and solutions derived (Coser 1956; Deutsch 1973; Simmel 1955). It can serve integrative functions through the voicing of each party's perspectives (Coser 1956) and can enhance the ability to work together in the future (Brown 1983). Stern, El-Ansary, and Coughlan (1996) posit that conflict motivates parties to adapt, grow, and seize new opportunities. Fundamental to the positive effect(s) of conflict is that "creative action on the part of some party to the conflict is needed if the conflict is to be successfully resolved" (Rosenbloom 1987, p. 121). Therefore, in buyer–seller relationships, salespeople need to manage conflict actively and effectively for it to produce positive outcomes (Johanson and Mattsson 1987).

Conflict Management Strategies

Numerous typologies of conflict management have been developed (Rahim and Bonoma 1979; Thomas 1976, 1979). Most of these typologies incorporate two dimensions based on the valences for satisfying different sets of concerns, such as concern for self and for the other party's needs. The present study is based on Thomas's (1979) framework, shown in Figure 1, because it is the most widely used. This framework was also used in Ganesan (1993) and Xie, Song, and Stringfellow (1998).

Beginning at the top left of Figure 1, the "confrontation" approach for dealing with conflict places a premium on one's own objectives, but limited attention is paid to the other party's goals. This conflict management approach has been described by other researchers as "forcing" (Blake and Mouton 1964), "confrontation" (Thomas 1992), "win-lose" (Hall 1969), "dominating" (Rahim and Bonoma 1979), "competing" (Ganesan 1993), and "contending" (Pruitt 1983). Given the relationship selling context of this research, we term this approach "confrontation," suggesting that salespeople using this approach remain steadfast, but not necessarily adversarial, with their customers.

At the other extreme in Figure 1, the "accommodation" conflict management approach attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns, while neglecting one's own position in conflict episodes. In addition to the term "accommodation" (Ganesan 1993; Thomas 1976), researchers have called this general approach "smoothing over" (Blake and Mouton 1964), "yield losing" (Hall 1969), "obliging" (Rahim and Bonoma 1979), or "yielding" (Pruitt 1983).

In the middle of Figure 1, the center approach, "compromise," attempts to attain moderate but incomplete satisfaction

of parties' concerns, giving up something but also holding out for something (Blake and Mouton 1964; Hall 1969; Rahim and Bonoma 1979; Thomas 1976). This conflict management approach has also been called "sufficing" (Spitzberg and Canary 1985) or "sharing" (Thomas 1976).

Finally, while the compromising strategy foregoes searching for optimality for each of the parties, a fourth approach, "collaboration" (Thomas 1976), involves searching for integrative, win-win resolutions of conflict that fully satisfy the concerns of the two parties in disagreement by expanding the level of joint outcomes. This conflict management approach has also been called "problem solving" (Dant and Schul 1992; Pruitt 1983), "synergistic" (Hall 1969), or "integrating" (Rahim and Bonoma 1979).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework specifying the relationships between the constructs discussed in the previous section is shown in Figure 2. Hypotheses related to the principal contribution of this research, the moderating effects of conflict management approaches, are outlined following the discussion of potential direct effects of the types of conflict and conflict management behaviors.

Potential Effects of Conflict Type on the Quality of the Relationship

Affective Conflict

Affective conflict produces interpersonal tensions, animosities, and annoyances that affect both parties' desire to communicate or interact with each other and eventually can serve to stagnate and even terminate buyer–seller relationships (Jehn 1995). For example, buyers may not be as receptive to new ideas from salespeople when interpersonal friction exists (Jehn 1992). In addition, affective conflict limits the processing of new information, gives rise to hostile attributions concerning each other's intentions and behaviors, decreases willingness to tolerate opposition, and disturbs effective communication and cooperation within the network (e.g., Amason 1996; Jehn 1995). Research has consistently reported the negative effects of affective conflict on relationships (Frazier, Gill, and Kale 1989; Jehn 1997; Kumar and Scheer 1995). Thus,

> *Hypothesis 1a: Affective conflict in buyer–seller relationships negatively affects relationship quality.*
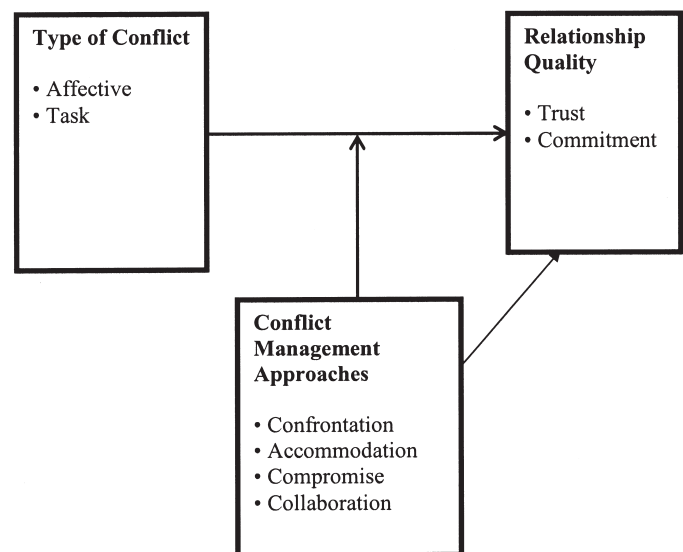
Task Conflict

The effect of task conflict on buyer–seller relationships is unclear. Even though task conflict can result in the same information processing and attribution problems as affective conflict,

Figure 1
Two-Dimensional Taxonomy of Conflict Management Behavior
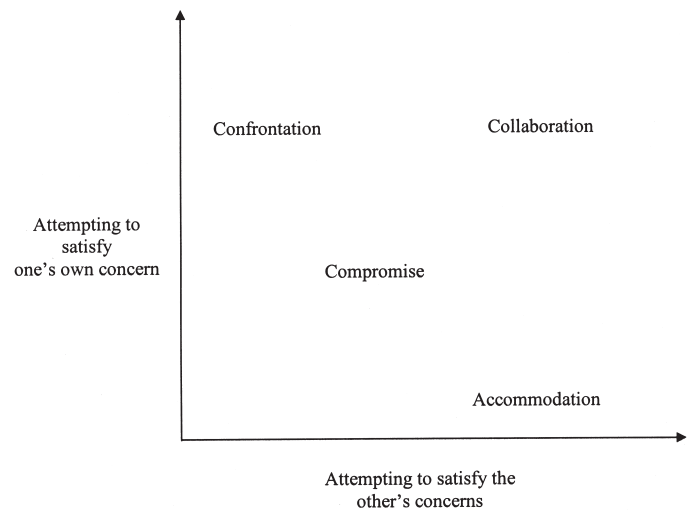
Source: Adapted from Thomas (1979).

Figure 2
Conceptual Framework

disagreements over how to undertake tasks have been found to produce positive outcomes in management teams (e.g., Frances and Sandberg 2000; Jehn and Chatman 2000; Jehn and Mannix 2001). These positive outcomes arise because task conflict provides the means for buyers and sellers to identify and discuss alternative perspectives and remove impediments to effectively working together. Task conflict can also stimulate interest and curiosity, be the catalyst for understanding, and enable problems to be aired and solutions arrived at (Coser 1956; Deutsch, 1973; Simmel 1955). Thus, it is anticipated

that task conflict will have a positive effect on the quality of buyer–seller relationships.

Hypothesis 1b: Task conflict in buyer–seller relationship positively affects relationship quality.

Effects of Conflict Management Approaches on Relationship Quality

If conflictive situations are to be resolved in a positive manner, salespeople must manage conflict with their customers to achieve positive results (Bradford, Stringfellow, and Weitz 2005; Canary, Cuspach, and Messman 1995; Coser 1956; Johanson and Mattsson 1987). As depicted in Figure 1, the four conflict management approaches examined in this research are collaboration, confrontation, accommodation, and compromise.

Confrontation and Accommodation

In contrast to the win-win orientation of the collaborative approach, the use of confrontation and accommodation approaches emphasizes the resolution of conflict that benefits one party to the detriment of the other. These conflict management behaviors produce a win-lose situation. The confrontation approach involves salespeople emphasizing their viewpoint and preferred resolution of conflict episodes—behaviors that can lead buyers to feel their perspectives are not being considered and thus damage the quality of the relationships. An unwillingness to consider the customer's interests is a frequent antecedent to deeper conflict (Tjosvold and Wong 1994). On the other hand, when using accommodation, salespeople allow buyers to have their way at the expense of their own preferences. Although accommodation does not escalate conflict, this style is associated with concessions and denying or failing to express one's needs (Gross and Guerrero 2000). Because accommodation does not enable salespeople to achieve their goals, this approach to conflict management is likely to have a negative effect on relationship quality even though customers in the short run may perceive the relationship is good (Johanson and Mattsson 1987).

Compromise Approach

Unlike confrontation and accommodation conflict management approaches, the compromise approach seeks solutions that consider both parties' needs, typically by "splitting the difference" and "meeting the partner halfway" (Hocker and Wilmot 1998). Because neither party is totally satisfied with the outcome, it is not surprising that much of the previous research on compromising conflict management behavior found it to be, at best, only moderately effective (Gross and Guerrero

2000) and may even negatively affect relationship quality due to both parties' limited satisfaction with the outcome.

Hypothesis 2: The use of (a) confrontation, (b) accommodation, and (c) compromise conflict management approaches by salespeople in buyer–seller relationships has a negative effect on relationship quality.

Collaboration

As discussed previously, a collaboration conflict management approach involves exploring and developing integrative, win-win solutions to conflict issues. The use of this approach involves open lines of communication, high levels of information sharing, and the consideration of each party's goals (Gross and Guerrero 2000). Although the process of sharing potentially sensitive information to develop win-win solutions can be time consuming and risky, we speculate that in most situations, the benefits of collaboration outweigh the costs and risks; thus, the use of collaboration should typically improve the quality of relationships. Thus,

Hypothesis 2d: The use of a collaborative conflict management approach by salespeople in buyer–seller relationships will positively affect the quality of their relationships.

Managing Different Types of Conflict

The framework in Figure 2 proposes that conflict management approaches moderate the relationships between affective and task conflict and relationship quality. Descriptions of these hypothesized interaction effects are presented below.

Managing Affective Conflict

When interpersonal incompatibilities exist, behaviors associated with accommodation and compromise conflict management approaches can alleviate the negative sentiment associated with affective conflict. These conflict management approaches signal the salesperson's consideration of the buyer's needs and a willingness to consider those needs in resolving conflicts. Further, the use of these approaches indicates a willingness to work together and a respect for the buyer's perspective. By accentuating the buyer's perspective and allowing business to progress in a manner consistent with the goals of the buyer, the use of these approaches can divert concerns away from the interpersonal incompatibility. In addition, the use of compromise and accommodation conflict management approaches offers a quick route to the resolution of affective conflicts (Hocker and Wilmot 1998). Thus,

Hypothesis 3: The use of (a) accommodation and (b) compromise conflict management approaches by salespeople

has a positive moderating effect on the impact of affective conflict on buyer–seller relationship quality.

In contrast, the use of a confrontation approach in the presence of affective conflict has been found to be associated with low levels of interpersonal appropriateness and effectiveness at the relational level (Hocker and Wilmot 1998). The interpersonal incompatibilities associated with affective conflicts between salespeople and their customers are exacerbated by the assertiveness and self-confidence demonstrated by salespeople who may use the confrontation conflict management approach. Confrontation may signal unwillingness to compromise. Thus,

Hypotheses 3c: The use of a confrontation conflict management approach by salespeople has a negative moderating effect on the impact of affective conflict on buyer–seller relationship quality.

The use of collaborative conflict management behaviors is potentially the most effective style in managing conflict and improving the quality of buyer–seller relationships because it indicates that salespeople want to work with buyers to develop mutually beneficial solutions (Gross and Guerrero 2000). It provides buyers with access to salespeople's perceptions of incompatible objectives, thereby giving them the opportunity to develop integrative solutions that consider the goals and needs of both parties (Tutzauer and Roloff 1988). However, the implementation of this approach involves sharing information, which is not done effectively in relationships characterized by affective conflict. Indeed, engaging in collaborative conflict management behaviors may exacerbate the negative effect in these relationships. Thus, the moderating effects of collaboration on affective conflict are not clear and a significant moderating effect for the use of this conflict management approach is not anticipated.

Managing Task Conflict

As discussed previously, research has shown that task conflict can lead to positive outcomes. The use of the collaborative conflict management approach involves pursuing a mutually beneficial result through the search for ideas on how to better work together. This approach should be particularly effective in handling task conflict because the frank expression of differences in perspectives and preferences with regard to the task facilitates the identification, formulation, and adoption of win-win resolutions. This approach can be time consuming and risky, but it is particularly effective in improving the quality of relationships because it signals appreciation and concern for the other party's perspective.

Engaging in mutual problem solving is beneficial for resolving task conflict, and the use of a confrontational approach can

also be effective. When engaging in confrontation, salespeople emphasize their point of view in the conflict episode. Although this approach may appear unwise on the surface, salespeople who steadfastly represent the benefits of their company's products and services and, most importantly, their own (or their company's) viewpoint on moving business forward provide alternative perspectives and introduce alternative methods of accomplishing tasks. Research suggests that successful management of task conflict depends on how confrontation is enacted. If salespeople can skillfully engage in confrontation behavior in a manner that suggests furthering the relationship (i.e., highly relaxed, highly friendly, and highly attentive), the negative perceptions of the other can be moderated to yield positive outcomes (Infante and Gorden 1989). A buyer–seller relationship that is open to opposing viewpoints and involves participants who are willing to communicate their opinions has a foundation for high-quality interaction, creativity, and the development of sound relationships. Research shows that explaining one's perspective on an issue of dispute during conflict increases the likelihood of reaching a creative solution (Papa and Pood 1988). Thus,

Hypothesis 4: The use of (a) collaboration and (b) confrontation conflict management approaches by salespeople has a positive moderating effect on the impact of task conflict on buyer–seller relationship quality.

The salesperson's use of collaboration and confrontation conflict management strategies has a positive moderating effect, but accommodation and compromise are expected to have a negative moderating effect on task conflict. As discussed previously, the effective resolution of task conflict requires both parties to have a frank exchange of information and consider each other's perspective. However, the use of compromising conflict management behavior, unlike collaborative, confrontational, or accommodative conflict management behaviors that seek an optimal solution for one or both of the parties in conflict, seeks a solution that only partly satisfies either party's goals in the conflict. Compromising conflict management behaviors require searching for an intermediate position, through strategies such as splitting the difference, and meeting the partner halfway (Hocker and Wilmot 1998). By definition, the goal of the salesperson who uses this strategy of conflict management is to create a solution where each party settles for outcomes that represent something less than what each respective party would deem optimal.

Simply accommodating buyers might resolve the task conflict quickly, but such a conflict resolution strategy often precludes the development of mutually satisfying outcomes needed to build high-quality relationships. The salesperson's use of accommodative conflict management behavior reduces the exchange of information and, thus, can exacerbate the negative effect of task conflict. Customers derive value from

salespeople's alternative perspectives and alternative methods of accomplishing their work. Salespeople who use accommodative conflict management behavior miss the opportunity to create value for their customers. Thus,

Hypothesis 4: The use of (c) accommodation and (d) compromise conflict management approaches by salespeople have a negative moderating effect on the impact of task conflict on buyer–seller relationship quality.

METHOD

Research Setting and Sample

The respondents in this research were a nationwide sample of business-to-business salespeople from three different industries—medical supplies and instruments, building materials, and home appliances. Multiple industries were used in this research to increase the generalizability of the results. Salespeople from the medical supplies and home appliance industries were missionary and new business sellers and the salespeople from the building materials industry were consultative and new business sellers (Moncrief, Marshall, and Lassk 2006). These salespeople are considered the primary marketing boundary spanners and are cognizant of the conflicts encountered in business relationships with their customers, as well as of their own conflict management behaviors. Members of upper management from the respondent companies were contacted in order to obtain the sample of salespeople used in this research.

The survey investigated (1) salespeople's perception of the sources of conflict in the focal buyer–seller relationship, (2) the types of conflict management behavior used in the relationship; and (3) their assessment of the quality of the buyer–seller relationship. Questionnaires were mailed to salespeople along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and a postage-paid pre-addressed return envelope to the research team. All salespeople responding were guaranteed confidentiality. Each company was offered a summary report of the results in exchange for their participation. The salespeople were instructed to complete the entire questionnaire with reference to a specific customer upon whom they were asked to provide information.

The sample size was 385 salespeople. Two hundred thirty-five salespeople completed and returned the survey for a response rate of 61 percent. There were 105 respondents from the building materials industry, 82 from the appliance industry, and 48 from the medical supplies industry.

A Chow test of the regression model used to test the hypotheses indicates that the responses from the salespeople in different industries could be pooled: $F(17, 201) = 1.92$, $p > 0.10$ for medical supplies versus building materials and major home appliances, $F(17, 201) = 1.23$, $p > 0.10$ for building materials versus medical supplies and major home appliances, and $F(17, 201) = 0.59$, $p > 0.10$ for major home appliances versus medical supplies and building materials.

In order to obtain addition variance in the types of relationships, we randomly asked some respondents to choose a customer with whom they had a good, long-standing relationship, and others were asked to choose a customer with whom their relationship was in the early stages of development. There were 131 salespeople who answered with regard to good, long-standing relationships and 104 who answered with regard to a customer in the early relationship stages. A Chow test using the regression model used to test the hypotheses indicates that responses from salespeople about customers at different relationships could be pooled, $F(17, 201) = 1.61$, $p > 0.10$.

Efforts to overcome nonresponse bias were accomplished by attempting to increase the response rate by soliciting the respondents who did not answer in the first wave of mailings by sending a second mailing (two weeks later) accompanied by a telephone call. The expectation is that there would be more conflict reported by salespeople who reported on relationships in the second wave of mailings.

Per Armstrong and Overton (1977), one indicator of potential responses is differences between early and later respondents. A Chow test of the regression model used to test the hypotheses comparing early and respondents indicated no difference in the estimated coefficients, $F(17, 201) = 0.74$, $p > 0.10$.

The study's respondents were experienced and knowledgeable. The salespeople in this sample have been working an average of 16 years in this occupation, and have worked, on average, 10 years for their current companies. They spend about 25 percent of their time selling to their customers. The average amount of time that the salespeople have been doing business with their respective customers is six years, and the average amount of time that these customers have been doing business with their companies is 12 years.

Measure Development

Three pretests were undertaken. The goal of the first pretest was to assist in instrument and measure development. A preliminary instrument was developed and tested on 81 groups of MBA students assessing conflict management behaviors, types of conflict, and quality of the relationship who participated in a decision-making exercise. The groups of students engaged in an "off the shelf" mixed-motive exercise developed by Beggs, Brett, and Weingart (2000) that has as its goal exposing the subjects to decision-making situations that inherently involved conflict that required members of the group to work toward a solution. Item analysis and exploratory factor analyses were used to assess and purify the measures. Items with loadings over 0.65 were retained and cross loadings between factors

were spread over 0.45 (highest loading on one factor was at least 0.45 from the highest loading on another factor).

The second and third pretests were used in tandem to assess the revised survey with regard to feasibility of respondent completion and return, time requirement, and clarity of specific items. In this instance, a survey containing the measures of conflict, conflict management approaches, and relationship quality was sent to 45 salespeople from a major medical equipment company. The 45 salespeople who participated in this stage of the research were instructed to select a customer upon whom to base their answers and then were asked to provide contact information for that customer. All salespeople were guaranteed confidentiality, but understood that the customer they identified would also be sent a survey as part of the research project. We then sent a survey to the key customer contact and obtained the customer's perceptions of relationship quality. Both the salesperson's and the customer's questionnaires employed a seven-point Likert-type scale for the items associated with relationship quality and were anchored by strongly agree/strongly disagree and very frequently/never.

In addition to analyses of the survey responses, debriefings were conducted with these salespeople, members of sales management, and their customers. Based on this extensive feedback, the questionnaire was shortened and streamlined. All responses from the pretest stages were then discarded and were not included in the study reported here.

Measures

The measures used in this research and their properties are described in the Appendices. The measures were developed for this study and analyzed using the two-step approach recommended by Gerbing and Anderson (1988). First, exploratory factor analysis was used to assess the underlying factor structure of the items (see Appendix A). Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess the properties of the measures. Because the inclusion of a large number of measures would result in too complex a measurement model for LIS-REL with this data set, Bentler and Chou (1987) recommend that submodels be analyzed. Three separate measurement models, grouping related constructs, were run. The first CFA grouped items measuring types of conflict. The second CFA analyzed measures of conflict management behaviors. The third CFA model included the relationship quality measures. The fit indices indicate that the models fit the data well. All item-standardized loadings for each construct were significant ($p < 0.01$), which supports the unidimensionality of the constructs. Using Gerbing and Anderson's (1988) paradigm, all measures survived an exploratory factor analysis. In the CFA for the independent measures, the chi-square statistics were significant and, based on the maximum likelihood factor

loadings, goodness-of-fit indices, root mean squared residuals, and normalized residuals, there appear to be unidimensional, internally consistent, and reliable measures (sources of conflict measures are chi-squared = 22.9, $p = 0.04$, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.08, incremental fit index [IFI] = 0.97, and comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.97, and conflict management behaviors statistics are chi-squared = 103.6, $p = 0.01$, RMSEA = 0.06, IFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.93; the goodness-of-fit measures for the relationship quality variables are chi-squared = 107.0, RMSEA = 0.08, IFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.94). The items supporting each construct were reduced to one factor. The items for each measure are shown in Appendix B.

Discriminant validity of each construct was assessed in several ways. First, all constructs exhibit discriminant validity because each correlation is less than one by an amount greater than twice its respective standard error (Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990). Second, an examination of the theta matrix confirmed that no item loaded higher on another construct than on its associated construct. Discriminant validity of each construct was then assessed by calculating the shared variance between all possible pairs of constructs and demonstrating that they were lower than the average variance extracted for the individual constructs. All possible pairs of independent measures passed Fornell and Larcker's (1981) test, which indicates discriminant validity among the measures. To further assess discriminant validity, pairs of scales were assessed in a series of two-factor confirmatory models, in accordance with suggestions of Bagozzi and Phillips (1982). Following the procedure Jöreskog and Sörbom (1996) describes, the two-factor models were respecified by restricting the factor intercorrelations to unity and then performing chi-squared difference tests (with one degree of freedom) on the values obtained for the constrained and unconstrained models. In all cases, the chi-squared was higher in the constrained models, thereby demonstrating discriminant validity between the constructs. These results are shown in Table 1 and suggest the measurement scales are reliable and valid.

Relationship Quality

Buyer–seller relationship quality has been defined in several related, yet distinct, ways in the marketing literature (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Dwyer and Oh 1987; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Kalwani and Narayandas 1995; Kumar and Scheer 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Although there is no consensus on this measure, trust and commitment have been central in many conceptualizations of relationship quality (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Kumar and Scheer 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994). For instance, Morgan and Hunt (1994) proposed that quality evaluations of a relationship between a customer and a firm should be composed of the customer's

Table 1
Assessment of Discriminant Validity

Test	Unconstrained Model Chi-Square	Constrained Model Chi-Square	Difference in Chi-Square
Affective Conflict with			
Task conflict	22.9	55.2	32.3**
Accommodation	18	77	59.0**
Confrontation	7.9	49.3	41.4**
Compromise	8	43	35.0**
Collaboration	21.1	111.6	90.5**
Task Conflict with			
Accommodation	32.3	66.9	34.6**
Confrontation	16.9	35.6	18.7**
Compromise	30.4	50.7	20.3**
Collaboration	16.5	69.2	52.7**
Accommodation with			
Confrontation	24.1	83.1	59.0**
Compromise	35.2	71.8	36.6**
Collaboration	31.2	90.4	59.2**
Confrontation with			
Compromise	17.2	30.7	13.5**
Collaboration	6.9	43.6	36.7**
Collaboration with			
Compromise	6.8	20	13.2**

** $p < 0.01$

commitment to the selling company as well as the customer's trust in that selling company. Extant literature shows that trust and commitment are the most commonly used constructs in the measurement of relationship quality (i.e., Flaherty and Pappas 2000; Sallee and Flaherty 2003). Trust and commitment is an established and commonly used pair of dependent variables to show the extent to which the relationship between a buyer and seller is developed (e.g., Kumar and Scheer 1995; Liu and Leach 2001; Narayandas and Kasturi 2004; Siguaw, Simpson, and Baker 1998).

The items used in the relationship quality scale were first factor analyzed for each construct—trust and commitment—separately. Cronbach's alpha for the trust scale was 0.87 for salespeople. In this research, trust is measured through a seven-item scale (shown in Appendix B). Cronbach's alpha for the commitment measure used here was 0.86. The commitment measure is adapted from research by Anderson and Weitz (1992) and indicates the extent to which the customer is committed to doing business with the selling company. These scores were then multiplied together so that a high level of both trust and commitment must be present for the relationship quality to be considered high.

To assess the validity of this measure of relationship quality based on the perceptions of salespeople, 28 customers in the focal relationships completed short questionnaires with the same items measuring relationship quality as completed by the salespeople in the relationship. The correlation between the salesperson and customer responses was 0.86, $p < 0.01$.

Types of Conflict

Two conflict types were assessed for this study. *Task conflict* deals specifically with the incompatibilities and disagreements that occur when two parties' business processes, transactional norms, or preferences differ with regard to how business is to be conducted. It is operationally defined as the frequency with which disagreements occur over how to work together. Cronbach's alpha for this three-item scale was 0.84. *Affective conflict* reflects interpersonal strains between two individuals. It is operationally defined as the frequency with which interpersonal incompatibilities or tensions occur that are not business related. Cronbach's alpha for this three-item scale was 0.81.

Conflict Management Behaviors

In the survey instrument, the salesperson was asked "Think about the customer that you indicated on the previous page. With reference to conflict situations with this customer, please indicate the extent of your agreement with each of the

following statements by circling the appropriate number. 1 represents 'never' and 7 represents 'very frequently.'" First, we prompted the salesperson to answer with regard to a conflict situation and then we asked how frequently that salesperson uses the different conflict management behaviors.

The operational definitions for the four conflict management behaviors are based on a goal-directed model of behavior (see Thomas 1976). (1) *Confrontation conflict management behavior* reflects the frequency with which the salesperson employs a firm stance for his or her company's point of view in conflicts when they occur. For confrontation conflict management behavior, a three-item scale was used with a Cronbach alpha of 0.67. (2) *Accommodative conflict management behavior* reflects the frequency with which the salesperson allows the customer to win (achieve his or her goals) in the disagreement, while refraining from behaviors that assist the seller's direct goals. Cronbach's alpha for the five-item accommodative conflict management behavior scale was 0.85. (3) *Compromising conflict management behavior* reflects the frequency with which the salesperson employs a give-and-take strategy to find a solution to a conflict. The three-item scale for compromising conflict management behavior has a Cronbach alpha of 0.70. (4) *Collaborative conflict management behavior* reflects the frequency with which the salesperson demonstrates effort to find a new solution to a conflict that will be mutually beneficial to both parties. This three-item scale has a Cronbach alpha of 0.80. Data for each of the conflict management scales were collected using seven-point items anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree."

Analysis Methodology

The hypotheses were tested by estimating a multiple regression. The independent variables were types of conflict and the conflict management behaviors, and the dependent variable was relationship quality. The measures of the individual constructs were mean-centered to orthogonalize the direct and moderating effects. The moderator effects, representing the effects of conflict management behavior interacting with conflict, were created directly by multiplying the appropriate constructs together. Two covariates were added to the model: (1) the age of the buyer–seller relationship, and (2) the market share for the salesperson's offering with the customer. Measures of these covariates were based on the survey responses of the salespeople. The market share covariate in this research is comparable to share of customer wallet as it pertains to a specific product category. The salesperson is asked to estimate "What percentage market share does your company enjoy from this customer in comparison to your competition? In other words, "what percentage of the money that this customer spends on the products that you sell to them does

your company get?" Thus, the one multiple regression model is estimated as follows:

$$\text{Relationship Quality} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 \Gamma_1 + \beta_4 \Gamma_2$$
$$+ \beta_5 \Gamma_3 + \beta_6 \Gamma_4 + \beta_7 X_1 \Gamma_1 + \beta_8 X_1 \Gamma_2 + \beta_9 X_1 \Gamma_3 + \beta_{10} X_1 \Gamma_4$$
$$+ \beta_{11} X_2 \Gamma_1 + \beta_{12} X_2 \Gamma_2 + \beta_{13} X_2 \Gamma_3 + \beta_{14} X_2 \Gamma_4 + \beta_{14} Z_1 + \beta_{15} Z_2,$$

where X_1 is the level of task conflict, X_2 is the level of affective conflict, Γ_1 is the use of confrontation conflict management, Γ_2 is the use of accommodation conflict management, Γ_3 is the use of compromise conflict management, Γ_4 is the use of collaborative conflict management, Z_1 is the length of relationship, and Z_2 is the market share of salesperson's offering with customer

The correlation matrix is shown in Table 2 and the results of the estimation are shown in Table 3.

RESULTS

Descriptive Results

Ninety-seven percent of the salespeople reported experiencing conflict in their relationship with the designated buyer. Further, conflict appears to be frequent and important, as salespeople reported that they spend an average of 17 percent of their time with customers handling conflict. As to type of conflict, 95 percent reported that they experience task conflict, and 85 percent reported some level of affective conflict in the relationship.

Effects of Conflict Type and Conflict Management Approaches

Because the interaction terms in the model are significant, the estimated coefficients for the direct effects have a restricted interpretation. Because the data are mean-centered, the coefficients of the direct terms are estimated at the mean and not at zero of the other variables in the model. However, they are a simple transformation of the coefficients estimated on the raw data (Gatignon and Vosgerau 2006).

Given this caveat, H1a predicts that affective conflict negatively affects the quality of the buyer–seller relationship due to interpersonal friction. The predicted negative relationship between affective conflict and the quality of the buyer–seller relationship was not supported; however, task conflict (H1b) has a significant positive influence on the overall quality of the buyer–seller relationship ($\beta_1 = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). Although task conflict positively affects relationship quality, the lack of strong effects for the different types of conflict reinforces the conceptual framework of this research—that is, conflict, in and of itself, does not affect relationship quality. Rather,

Table 2
Correlation Matrix for Sources of Conflict, Conflict Management Behaviors, and Relationship Quality

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Affective Commitment	Task Conflict	Accommodation	Confrontation	Collaboration	Compromise
Affective Commitment	1.83	0.83						
Task Conflict	2.90	1.20	0.436					
Accommodation	4.10	1.00	−0.066	−0.206				
Confrontation	4.19	1.13	0.082	0.165	−0.250			
Collaboration	6.14	0.83	−0.312	−0.182	0.042	0.143		
Compromise	5.27	0.99	0.059	0.110	0.190	0.253	0.413	
Relationship Quality	32.45	9.86	−0.436	−0.100	−0.098	0.035	0.053	−0.073

relationship quality is affected by the manner in which the conflict is managed.

H2 predicts a positive effect for collaboration conflict management on relationship quality and a negative effect for the other three conflict management strategies—confrontation, accommodation, and compromise. Three of these hypotheses are supported. Collaboration has a significant positive effect on relationship quality ($\beta_6 = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$), whereas accommodation and compromise have significant negative effects on relationship quality ($\beta_3 = -0.21$, $p < 0.05$ and $\beta_5 = -0.24$, $p < 0.05$, respectively). The predicted negative effect of confrontation on affective conflict is not significant.

Moderating Effects of Conflict Management Approaches

The primary intent of this research is to demonstrate that the critical issue in building relationship quality is use of the appropriate conflict management approach when encountering specific types of conflict. The estimated coefficients support five of the seven hypothesized moderating effects, thus indicating that selecting the appropriate conflict management approach has an important impact on buyer–seller relationships. In order to estimate the incremental effects of the moderating constructs, a regression with only the effects of the types of conflict and the different conflict management behaviors was compared to the full model. The R-squared for the original full model (0.190) was greater than the regression without the interactions (0.057) and thus we conclude the analysis of the full model has incremental explanatory power. The test for the incremental change was significant ($F = 2.55$; $p < 0.002$) (Cohen and Cohen 1975).

Managing Affective Conflict

With respect to managing affective conflict, H3 proposes that accommodation and compromise have a positive moderating effect and confrontation has a negative moderating effect. The moderating effect of compromise is positive and significant ($\beta_7 = 1.10$, $p < 0.01$), but confrontation has a significant negative moderating effect ($\beta_8 = -0.81$, $p < 0.01$). However, the proposed positive moderating effect of accommodation is insignificant ($\beta_9 = -0.16$, $p < 0.10$).

Managing Task Conflict

With respect to managing task conflict, H3 proposes that collaboration and confrontation have a positive moderating effect and compromise and accommodation have a negative moderating effect. The moderating effect of collaboration is positive and significant ($\beta_{14} = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$), but compromise has a significant negative moderating effect ($\beta_{13} = -0.52$, $p < 0.01$) and accommodation has a significant negative moder-

Table 3
Results of the Regression Analysis Testing Hypotheses

	Unstandardized Beta Coefficients
Affective Conflict (AC)	0.19
Task Conflict (TC)	0.18*
Confrontation (CN)	−0.09
Accommodation (AM)	−0.21*
Compromise (CM)	−0.24*
Collaboration (CL)	0.33**
AC * CN	−0.81**
AC * AM	−0.16
AC * CM	1.10**
AC * CL	0.20
TC * CN	0.07
TC * AM	−0.21*
TC * CM	−0.52**
TC * CL	0.26*
Relationship Duration	−0.02
Market Share	0.01
R^2	0.19
Adjusted R^2	0.12
F-test (17, 218)	2.86**
Significance	0.00

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

ating effect ($\beta_{11} = -0.21$, $p < 0.05$). However, the proposed positive moderating effect of confrontation is insignificant ($\beta_{12} = -0.07$, $p > 0.10$).

DISCUSSION

Conflict in Buyer–Seller Relationships

Little research in marketing has hitherto explored the prevalence, nature, and management of conflict between the salesperson and customer. The present research, however, demonstrates that conflict is prevalent and important—overall, salespeople here report spending one in every six hours of their selling time dealing with conflict. Conflict is thus a major issue for sales management. Its effective management is central to the success of the salesperson who is assigned the responsibility of developing and maintaining partnering buyer–seller relationships. To be effective, salespeople must understand the nature of the conflict, the effects of conflict management styles, and the situational appropriateness of the styles of conflict management.

Affective and task conflict were found to occur in buyer–seller relationships (85 percent and 95 percent of the salespeople reported these types of conflict in the relationships they were reporting on, respectively). This study finds that

task conflict positively affects the quality of the buyer–seller relationship and this effect is amplified when salespeople use a collaboration conflict management approach. However, the positive effects of task conflict are mitigated by salespeople engaging in accommodating and compromising approaches. Affective conflict did not positively or negatively affect the overall relationship quality in this study. Its management determines whether it will have a positive or negative effect on relationship quality.

The Uses and Potentials of Confrontation and Compromise Conflict Management Approaches

The importance of a salesperson's use of conflict management strategies is underscored in this study. Of particular interest are the findings on the effective use of confrontation and compromise approaches. Surprisingly, the salesperson's frequency of use of the confrontation approach has no significant effect on relationship quality. However, in the presence of affective conflict, buyers appear to react negatively to confrontation, preferring to have their own views carefully considered. In these instances, salespeople driving their agendas may create a sense of inflexibility, forcing customers to perceive a lack of benevolence. With respect to task conflict in particular, the confrontation approach is hypothesized to hold the potential for positive outcomes on the quality of the buyer–seller relationship here. In high-quality relationships, the use of confrontation behavior when task conflict occurs offers voice to concerns, which often directly addresses the issues, and serves to advance the business relationship. However, when task conflict is present, salespeople who employ a confrontation strategy surprisingly did not affect the quality of the relationship.

Also of interest are the findings on the effective use of compromise conflict management behaviors. The definition of compromise conflict management suggests that the use of compromise conflict management should lead to effective and appropriate relationship results. However, compromise must be used appropriately. In the presence of affective conflict, the salesperson's use of compromise leads to positive results. However, the use of compromise conflict management behavior is not appropriate for all conflict situations. The use of a compromise conflict management approach in the face of task conflict does not lead to a positive result because the nature of task conflict does not lend itself to the effective use of compromise. When a buyer and salesperson come together to negotiate, they both want to move forward rather than settle for something less than that which seems optimal to either party. Thus, there is no relationship benefit for "meeting the customer halfway" because neither the salesperson's nor the customer's desires for creating the most favorable processes for accomplishing work are realized.

Salespeople Should Be Trained to Effectively Use Behaviors Other Than Collaboration

Sales managers are interested in providing their salespeople with the necessary tools to do their jobs well. Although identification of various types of conflict and conflict management is teachable, both are commonly underemphasized skills in sales training programs. Salespeople are commonly trained to facilitate the development of close relationships with their customers. However, it should be noted that the correct identification of the type of conflict is a necessary component in being able to manage conflict effectively. The salespersons' effective use of conflict management is dependent on the type of conflict they are confronted with when dealing with their customer. More importance in sales training could be placed on the identification of the types of conflict so that salespeople can manage conflict to the betterment of the relationship with their customers.

Study Limitations

The results presented here in general support the basic premises of the research, but several limitations must be noted. First, the salespeople in our sample reported on only one relationship, with one customer. This limited observation is likely to have decreased the amount of variance in our measure of relationship quality and thus may have led to more conservative estimates of effects (in this regard, the levels of conflict reported are surprisingly high). Second, the design of this research did not allow us to prescribe when it may be appropriate to use collaborative conflict management behavior. (Collaborative conflict management behavior is commonly believed to lead to the best outcomes, but this was not supported here.) Further, even though this study included the salesperson's perceptions of the relationship, it would have been fruitful to investigate a dyadic measure of customer–salesperson perceptions of the quality of the relationship. Finally, common method variance due to using the same person and measurement approach for assessing independent and dependent constructs might bias the effects of the types of conflict and conflict management behaviors on relationship quality results toward significance; however, it is unlikely to bias the estimates for the moderating effects. In addition, the hypothesized negative effects of compromise and accommodation are somewhat counterintuitive.

Directions for Future Research

A number of further opportunities for investigation are suggested by these research results. For instance, an understanding of whether or not sales managers can affect the sources of conflict or the conflict management behaviors used by their salespeople would be of value based on this research. In addition, the role

of compensation schemes with respect to types of conflict encountered and for conflict management strategies employed is an interesting issue. For example, it may be that salespeople who are compensated with a high percentage of incentive pay would be more aggressive and would manage conflict much differently than those who are compensated by salary only. Thus, it is possible that sales managers might directly affect the manner in which salespeople behave in their relationships with customers by use of a compensation strategy.

Findings reported here have implications for the selection of the salespeople responsible for a firm's relationship with customers. Future research may well make use of advances in measuring relationship quality, such as combinatorial measures incorporating both attitudinal and behavioral measure dimensions. Another fruitful research path may be to investigate how conflict management may change over the life of a relationship, and whether individual differences affect the types of conflict generated, the propensities to the different types of conflict management behaviors, or the interaction between conflict management and type of conflict.

Our analysis showed that there were no differences between the usage of conflict management strategies in buyer–seller relationships in the early stages versus longer-term buyer–seller relationships. However, research in this area indicates that various conflict resolution methods do affect relationships differently at different stages (e.g., Claycomb and Frankwick 2004). Thus, based on the importance of relationships to firms, the prevalence of conflict in these relationships, and the importance of conflict management to affect conflict positively, future research should investigate how conflict and conflict management affect buyer–seller relationships over the relationship life cycle.

In summary, this research study has underscored the importance of how adaptive salespeople must be with regard to conflict management behavior in their approaches to developing long-term win-win relationships with their customers (Weitz 1981). To be most effective as relationship managers, salespeople must understand their conflict management options and how these are likely to affect the quality of the relationships with their customers in the various situations they encounter.

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APPENDIX A
Factor Analysis of Independent Measures

Items	Accommodative Conflict Management Behavior	Confrontation Conflict Management Behavior	Collaborative Conflict Management Behavior	Compromise Conflict Management Behavior	Affective Conflict	Task Conflict
X1	0.66	—	—	—	—	—
X2	0.76	—	—	—	—	—
X3	0.72	—	—	—	—	—
X4	0.82	—	—	—	—	—
X5	0.73	—	—	—	—	—
X6	—	0.72	—	—	—	—
X7	—	0.81	—	—	—	—
X8	—	0.71	—	—	—	—
X9	—	—	0.83	—	—	—
X10	—	—	0.84	—	—	—
X11	—	—	0.73	—	—	—
X12	—	—	—	0.80	—	—
X13	—	—	—	0.65	—	—
X14	—	—	—	0.72	—	—
X15	—	—	—	—	0.79	—
X16	—	—	—	—	0.81	—
X17	—	—	—	—	0.80	—
X18	—	—	—	—	—	0.84
X19	—	—	—	—	—	0.88
X20	—	—	—	—	—	0.74
Coefficient Alpha*	0.85	0.67	0.80	0.70	0.81	0.84
Variance Extracted (percent)	15	9	11	10	12	13

* Completely disaggregated scales.

APPENDIX B
Measures Used in the Study

Assessment of Relationship Quality

Instructions: Please answer the following questions in the manner in which you think your customer would answer. Thinking like the customer whom you mentioned on the earlier page, please indicate the extent to which the customer would agree with each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number: 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 7 represents "strongly agree."

Trust

I believe that this company cares about doing things that are beneficial to us both.
This company is truly interested in seeing that we both succeed.
There is reason to believe that this company is motivated to see that both of our companies reach their goals.
This company has the reputation of doing all of the things it commits to.
I believe that this company will back up its words.
This company doesn't make promises it can't keep.
I believe that this company will do what it says it will do.

Commitment

I stand behind this company even when others speak poorly about them.
I believe that I will buy from this company for a long time.
I am very committed to this salesperson's company.
My relationship with this company is a long-term alliance.

Conflict in the Buyer–Seller Relationship

Instructions: Think about the customer whom you indicated on the previous page. With reference to the customer, please indicate the frequency that you use the following behaviors when conflict arises by circling the appropriate number: 1 represents "never" and 7 represents "very frequently."

Cognitive Conflict

Disagreements because of differences in our companies' policies and rules.
Disagreements because the rules of our company are not consistent with the rules of the customer's company.
Differences in rules or policies have caused conflict between the customer and me.

Affective Conflict

Personality clashes between people from the customer's business and me.
There is tension between this customer and me.
This customer and I become irritated with one another over personal issues.

Conflict Management Behaviors

Instructions: Think about the customer whom you indicated on the previous page. With reference to the customer, please indicate the frequency that you use the following behaviors when conflict arises by circling the appropriate number: 1 represents "never" and 7 represents "very frequently."

Confrontation

I stand on firm ground regarding my position.
I emphasize my side of the disagreement.
I will argue a point.

Accommodation

I give in to the wishes of the customer.
I allow the customer to be right.
I go along with what the customer thinks.
I let the customer have his or her way.
I let the customer win disagreements.

Compromise

I use a give and take strategy.
I negotiate to reach a compromise.
I try to reach a happy medium.

Collaboration

I try to find a solution where we both win.
I actively seek a mutually beneficial solution.
I work with the customer in order to find the best solution.