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Sustainability and professional sales: a review and future research agenda

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SUSTAINABILITY AND PROFESSIONAL SALES: A REVIEW AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Sustainability has become a consideration for every firm operating in today's business landscape. Scholars are tasked with uncovering bridges and barriers to successfully implement sustainability strategies, and the academic community has largely responded. However, while sustainability research has proliferated across business disciplines, it is conspicuously missing from professional selling and sales management. This is partly due to conceptual ambiguity, but also because sustainability generally involves firm-level policies and programs, and therefore domains like consumer behavior, marketing strategy, and supply chain management have occupied the space. This is problematic because while executives develop sustainability strategies, the sales force is responsible for conveying those priorities to external stakeholders. Therefore, the goals of our manuscript are to: 1) organize and refine the definition of sustainability in a professional selling context, 2) review relevant literature that examines sustainability in that context, 3) explore emergent themes from this review that 4) reveal gaps in our understanding, and 5) present a research agenda for sales scholars to bridge these gaps and advance our understanding of the role of sustainability in sales and vice versa.

Keywords: Sustainability, environmental orientation, corporate social responsibility, triple bottom line, salespeople, stakeholders

1. INTRODUCTION

The sales profession is built around the ability to adapt, by necessity and by design. It is constantly shifting to adopt new technology, embrace emerging markets, and even withstand global pandemics. Now, professional selling must adapt to a paradigm where sustainability goals are a driver of business strategy and sustainability metrics are an indicator of business performance. We define sustainability in professional sales as the integration of environmental, social, and economic responsibility into the personal selling function at every stage of the sales process. It involves conveying sustainability priorities to internal and external stakeholders and maximizing value for the organization and the customer. Once a fringe issue tacked on to a single webpage or relegated to the end of an annual corporate report, sustainability now represents a strategic priority that can help firms differentiate from competition (White et al., 2019). Thus, firms may soon not adapt by choice but by necessity. As such, sustainability research has been growing across domains. A search of the American Marketing Association's ELMAR database (<https://www.ama.org/listing-types/calls-journals/>) revealed 14 special issues on sustainability between January 2022 and March 2023, in disciplines ranging from marketing, retailing, economics, banking, hospitality, and management.

However, sales research has been slow to this trend, and therefore, this review is also a call to action. Capitalism rewards organizations that outperform competitors, and this competition often occurs in the exchange between salespeople and customers (both in B2B and B2C contexts). Sustainability strategy now represents an opportunity to outperform competition (e.g., Tollin and Christensen 2019). While there was once ambiguity as to financial return on investment, scholars now agree that sustainability initiatives lead to increased performance (Gabler, Landers, and Richey 2021), financial well-being (Dixon-Fowler 2013), customer

commitment (Casidy and Lie 2023), corporate reputation (Quintana-García et al., 2021), trust and cooperation (Carter and Jennings 2002). And the momentum is growing. According to a 2022 IBM survey, 48% of CEOs say that increasing sustainability is a top priority (up 11 points from 2021), but over half (51%) also list it as among their greatest challenges (up 19 points from 2021) (IBM Newsroom 2022). A similar 2022 Gartner survey found—for the first time in history—CEOs placed environmental sustainability in their top ten priorities, saying it could help their firm differentiate from competitors at the same level as brand trust (Venturebeat 2022). But while 95% of CEOs report piloting some sustainability initiatives, just 23% confirm implementing any firm-wide strategy (IBM Newsroom 2022).

One reason businesses now recognize the importance of sustainability is because their customer base now expects it. A recent McKinsey study found that 78% of US consumers desire a sustainable lifestyle (McKinsey 2023) and 80% consider sustainability in some purchase decisions (Peterson 2022). Firms have responded by offering more sustainable products: between 2013 and 2018, 50% of the growth in consumer-packaged goods came from sustainability-marketed products (Whelan and Kronthal-Sacco 2019). More than ever, customers are willing to pay more for these attributes. Between 2020 and 2022, the percentage of consumers who would spend an extra 10% on sustainable products jumped from 58% to 90%, and that trend is likely to continue as Gen Z's influence grows in the marketplace (Petro 2022). Indeed, 81% of consumers expect to buy more environmentally-friendly products over the next five years (Martins 2023). This is good news for retailers, 80% of whom believe they can increase customer loyalty through their sustainability initiatives (Peterson 2022). However, while customer concern and motivation are high, a recent report found that 20% feel as if their personal consumption behavior does not matter, and that 70% are disillusioned, or “wary of corporate claims about progress toward

sustainability and suspicious that those corporate commitments are a ruse masking the true intent: merely to burnish reputations and attract customers” (Sanghi et al., 2022).

The disconnect is apparent, and this is where the salesforce comes in. Salespeople are called boundary-spanners because they span the boundary between organizations and customers (Leifer and Delbecq 1978). They must simultaneously know the value produced by a sustainably-focused firm and the value desired by sustainably-focused customers. Firm executives agree on the importance of sustainability—but are unsure how to implement it. Customers desire sustainable products—but are skeptical of both their role and firm intentions. The sales function is at the intersection of this problem. Consider a frontline salesperson for a well-known clothing brand engaging a customer. This salesperson must be able to convey all aspects of the brand to the customer, including performance specifications, cost, materials used—and sustainability attributes, but they must adapt the value proposition to the customer based on individual preferences. For instance, one customer may place a lot of weight on environmentally-friendly packaging and the next may not care. The salesperson must also engender trust in the brand (i.e., it is not greenwashing), if possible, bolster the customer’s confidence that their purchase makes a difference. This is quite a burden on a single employee, which is why it is surprising that sales scholars have not been at the frontline of sustainability research. This represents more than a research gap; it serves as a mandate for sales scholars to uncover effective sustainability strategies to satisfy stakeholders on both sides of the boundary.

In a review on sustainability research in marketing from 1958-2008, Chabowski and colleagues (2011) point out that most sales research involving sustainability used the term as a proxy for ethics. While it can be argued that sustainability is an ethical issue (Gabler et al., 2022), the cluster analysis revealed a dearth of articles investigating how sustainability was (or

could be) integrated into professional selling. Thus, their ‘basis for future research opportunities’ essentially neglected sales scholarship. A more recent systematic review from 1997-2016 is even more telling. Lunde’s (2018) analysis begins with the following quote:

The past two decades have seen a rapid growth in marketing research at the nexus of marketing and sustainability. This area of research provides opportunities for marketing researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to study sustainability questions related to climate change, consumption and behavior, advertising, message framing and communication, branding, marketing ethics, environmental concerns, business practices, public policy, innovation, and macromarketing, among others.

But the paper fails to use the term ‘sales’—let alone ‘salespeople’ or ‘salesperson’—once throughout the entire manuscript. These examples show that the marketing discipline failed to see the connection between professional sales and sustainability, leaving a conspicuous absence in the literature. Recently, though, this has changed. Sharma (2020) surveyed “academic researchers in business-to-business marketing” about the most important sustainability strategy topics to study. While customer behaviors, pricing, and branding were on the list, “communications and sales strategy” received a lot of attention from scholars. Specific research questions that emerged included, “How can a business-to-business sales organization positively impact the environment?” “How can sustainability policies and strategies be successfully transferred to the sales organization?” and “How can sales and operations planning underpin sustainable market strategy?”

We concur with Sharma (2020) that the intersection of sales strategy and sustainable strategy is a much-needed research area, and following their lead, our manuscript makes two major contributions. First, we provide a comprehensive review of sustainability research in the sales domain. This involves refining terms, producing new conceptualizations, and differentiating between domains (e.g., sales versus marketing, environmental versus social responsibility, etc.). Based on this review, we offer themes that synthesize the existing research.

This leads to our second contribution, which is to set the research agenda for continued exploration into sales and sustainability research.

2. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Refining Terminology

While similar systematic reviews note that differentiating among terminology is outside the scope of their investigation (Chernetsky, Hughes and Shrock 2022), we assert it is necessary given the differing viewpoints on sustainability. As business scholars, we are asked to deliver a consistent message to firms about what it is to be sustainable and how it will benefit their bottom line. Yet the simple goal of defining sustainability has eluded scholars and practitioners alike. According to Marshall and Toffel (2005), there were already more than 100 definitions by the mid-1990s, leading some to advance that the concept was intrinsically inexact (Gatto 1995). This definitional chaos rendered the concept elusive and without meaning, as evidenced by McDonagh and Prothero (2014)'s meta-analysis (1998-2013), decades later. Dahlsrud (2008) asserted that the problem with constructs, such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or sustainability, was not with formal definitions but rather how it "...is socially constructed in a specific context and how to take this into account when business strategies are developed" (p. 6). Therefore, there is a need for clarity surrounding what sustainability entails. We begin by examining CSR and how it comprises elements of sustainability.

2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility

Waldman, Siegel, and Javidan (2006) define CSR as "actions on the part of the firm that appear to advance, or acquiesce in the promotion of some social good, beyond the immediate interests of the firm and its shareholders and beyond that which is required by law" (p. 1703). It "reflects the social imperatives and the social consequences of business success...and

empirically consists of clearly articulated and communicated policies and practices of corporations that reflect business responsibility for some of the wider societal good” (Matten and Moon 2008, p. 405). This definition separates CSR from the government's role in social programs and from the solely profit-maximizing corporate mentality (Friedman 1970). Fundamentally, it changes the way we view the role of business from one of not harming society to one of actually improving it (Drucker 1986).

2.3 Green Marketing

Early definitions of CSR encompassed economic, legal, philanthropic, and ethical obligations (e.g., Carroll 1979), but left out responsibility toward the environment. As CSR definitions evolved (e.g., Carroll 2000), scholars acknowledged the growing friction between firms and the natural environment (Schwartz and Carroll 2003). At first, green marketing filled the void (Stanton and Futrell 1987). Polonsky and Mintu-Wimsatt (1995) define green marketing as “the application of marketing concepts to and tools that facilitate exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual goals in such a way that they preserve, protect, and conserve the physical environment” (p. 20). The term gained traction in the early 2000s as both cultural awareness and firm adoption rose (e.g., Mishra and Sharma 2014), and it is still an effective strategy to convey environmental values to customers (e.g., Gelderman et al., 2021).

2.4 The Triple Bottom Line

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) (Elkington 2013; Norman and MacDonald, 2004) is an effort to recognize the value of non-economic motives as a business strategy. Specifically, instead of considering profits as the only measure of success, Elkington (1998) suggested performance across social and environmental vectors as additional indicators. Thus, TBL is a proxy for sustainability in a business context (Dyck and Manchanda 2021), moving past the

Financial Bottom Line that is inadequate in today's business landscape (Kotler 2011; Wilkie and Moore 2012). However, because it is difficult to achieve high levels of all three performance indicators, firms often must choose which stakeholders to prioritize. Indeed, it involves ranking stakeholders (Greenley et al., 2005). Here some firms prioritize social stakeholder (e.g., community involvement, employee well-being, etc.) and others environmental stakeholders (e.g., emission reduction, pollution prevention, energy efficiency), while still pursuing profitability. While TBL has been widely acknowledged, it is not without problems. Some firms were viewed as engaging in environmental or social programs simply to increase financial performance, often described as 'greenwashing', or any practice that misrepresents a firm's environmental priorities (Szabo and Webster 2021). From overstating claims to outright lies, it is still a part of the sustainable business fabric (e.g., Huang et al., 2022), making trust and authenticity paramount for firms engaging in a TBL strategy (e.g., Casidy and Yan 2022), criteria we discuss later.

2.5 Environmental, Social, and Governance

A new term entered the vernacular in 2004 and became more widespread in 2010 as firms began to rethink investment strategy in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The acronym ESG refers to the Environmental, Social, and Governance standards that investors consider when identifying investment opportunities and evaluating risk (Ferrell 2021; Ferrell et al., 2022). Generally, high performance along ESG standards is positively related to market value (Zhou, Liu, and Luo 2022), as well as social performance (Albuquerque et al., 2019) and environmental performance (Pekovic et al., 2018). ESG standards have been adopted by Moody's, S&P, and Fitch (the big three credit rating agencies), which shows its permanence among investor decision-making (Billio et al., 2021). Ferrell (2021) suggests it is actually better suited to address social-ecological challenges than TBL.

2.6 Sustainability

The term ‘sustainability’ can either bring clarity or confusion to the discussion. Like green marketing, it prioritizes the natural environment; like CSR, it involves social and economic components. CSR frameworks and green marketing strategies often omit key stakeholders, making it difficult to draw direct relationships between an initiative and performance. However, sustainability strategies involve all of an organization’s stakeholders, so they can be directly linked to competitive advantage (Hult 2011). To be a sustainable society, our actions must meet our current needs but not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs (WCED 1987). According to the Center for Sustainable Enterprise, sustainability is “a way of doing business that creates profit while avoiding harm to people and the planet” (CSE 2010). That is, to achieve sustainability, a firm must perform well across three distinct but related vectors: social, environment, and economic. The term ‘vector’ refers to some quantity that has both a magnitude and direction—but cannot be expressed by a single number. We assert this is an apt descriptor of the facets of sustainability because each comprises measurable and unmeasurable aspects. For instance, a manufacturing plant can calculate its carbon footprint but not the long-term impact on biodiversity or the local community. Even the economic vector contains measurable (e.g., revenue) and unmeasurable components (e.g., impact on surrounding businesses). The Center’s definition integrates CSR and green marketing while acknowledging that the underlying goal of a firm is still to earn a profit. To be a sustainable business, then, a firm must achieve high performance along all three vectors.

2.7 A Hierarchy of Sustainable Business Strategies

Firms are motivated to develop sustainability strategies for a variety of reasons, and we present a strategic hierarchy in Figure 1. Like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, firms can only

move up the pyramid when the strategic priority below has been met. At the bottom of the pyramid are firms who comply to environmental or social standards imposed by governments or regulatory bodies. Not adhering to these regulations would incur sanctions or penalties, but the firm is not motivated to do more than follow the rules. Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan¹ is "one example of how a company works to comply with sustainability" (Khairunisa and Kusuma 2021). The firm held itself responsible for industry-wide problems it helped create, and in response, developed a brand-wide initiative to address those problems.

At the next level are firms who embark on sustainability initiatives to cut costs. This strategy recognizes the overlap in long-term investment, sustainability, and financial performance. Nike, for instance, has found that their more environmentally-friendly products are also a way to reduce costs. In a similar way, Google and Facebook reduce overhead by consuming green energy (Martin and Dent 2019). Importantly, not every sustainability decision that results in cost savings is necessarily motivated for this reason (e.g., it could be in response to government regulations), but it can be argued that each firm could look to cut cost with sustainable initiatives. It also requires a long-term perspective because many such initiatives (i.e., building sustainable factories) have large upfront costs.

Firms in the next tier realize that customers (B2B or B2C) derive value from their firm's environmental or social programs. One example is Nestle. They note on their website: "*We believe in the power of food to enhance quality of life. This belief fuels our desire to use our global scale, resources and expertise to contribute to a healthier and sustainable future for*

¹ It is important to note that industry dynamics, environmental factors, cultural differences, political circumstances, and other factors outside of a firm's control can influence these strategies. Further, firms can move up (or down) the pyramid as their motivations change or in response to changing customer expectations. For instance, Unilever is consistently ranked as a top sustainability brand. We discuss their Sustainable Living Plan strategy because it aligned with the bottom level of the hierarchy.

people and the planet. Creating Shared Value (CSV) is at the heart of our purpose: to unlock the power of food to enhance quality of life for everyone, today and for generations to come. We have sought to build our business by taking decisions that are not just good for us and our shareholders, but for society and the planet as well.” (www.nestle.com/sustainability).

Sustainability is built into their value proposition and communicated to stakeholders.

Finally, the top of the pyramid requires a firm’s identity to be completely aligned with sustainability. Patagonia is an example of a brand name practically synonymous with sustainability. Environmental and social responsibility are embedded within every part of their organizational strategy, meaning it is more than their value proposition, it is who they are (<https://www.patagonia.com/our-footprint/>). Companies that build a brand identity of sustainable will even serve as activists, going so far as to sue the government to protect the environment, as Patagonia did (Gelles 2018).

Insert Figure 1 about here.

2.8 Sustainability and the Salesperson

As noted, salespeople span the boundary between the firm and the customer. They are responsible for understanding customer wants and needs, adapting to changing customer expectations, and managing customer relationships in both B2B and B2C contexts. They are also responsible for understanding their firm’s sustainability priorities, conveying that value to customers, and providing information to their firm about customer preferences. The role of a salesperson has always been multi-faceted, and with the growing importance of sustainability to firms and customers alike, it will only become more complex. To date, there is little research—and therefore little guidance—on how to approach this new paradigm. In the next section, we

review the literature on the intersection of sustainability and professional sales, uncovering themes which may help move the discussion forward.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Procedure

Following previous studies (Chernetsky et al., 2022), we synthesized research on sustainability and sales through a comprehensive search and selection procedure. We conducted our review using a systematic process that allowed us to repeat steps if needed. Figure 2 outlines the process while Figure 3 provides a more detailed examination of each step within that process.

Insert Figure 2 and Figure 3 About Here

Our first step was to develop a list of a priori search criteria. We used terms such as “sustainability and sales,” “green marketing and sales.” Given the ambiguity of sustainability-related constructs (see Theme 1), we opened our search criteria to include more sales-related terms, such as “boundary-spanner,” “frontline employee,” “sales-service employee,” etc. See Table 1 for the full search terms. Next, we conducted a keyword and abstract search through EBSCO using Boolean strings with AND/OR statements. We used the EBSCO database because it reaches a wide array of journals across multiple disciplines. We employed specific criteria for inclusion or exclusion as seen in Figure 3. First, only articles from peer reviewed journals were considered. Next, all predatory journals were excluded. Then, we eliminated articles not written in English. Finally, articles were analyzed for topic relevance. The initial search produced 513 articles, ranging in publication date from January 2001 to February 2023. The latter date represents the most recent publication available while the former was produced by EBSCO as the first year where one such paper was published (given our search criteria).

Insert Table 1 About Here

The next step was to analyze the 513 articles. We used the metagear R package (Lajeunesse 2016), which contains tool specifically designed to facilitate systematic reviews. It builds a graphical user interface which allows researchers to screen titles, keywords, and abstracts for relevance. Two co-authors independently participated in this screening process, rating the article a “yes” if they believed it fit the scope of this project, a “maybe” if they were not sure, and a “no” if they saw no fit. Articles receiving two “no” votes were immediately excluded. Articles receiving two “yes” votes were included. If both comparison reviewers rated a given article as “maybe,” the third co-author read the paper to evaluate its ultimate inclusion. When there was disagreement among the comparison reviewers (i.e., some combination of “yes,” “no,” and “maybe”), again the third co-author read the paper. Then the team convened to discuss the article’s relevance and overcome disparities before making the decision to include or exclude. The initial comparison resulted in 13 divergent reviews across the 513 articles, which produces an interrater reliability of 97%. Across the reviewers there were 19 articles with at least one “yes” rating and 10 articles that were rated as a “maybe.” Of the 19 articles with one yes, 8 of these were voted for inclusion by both comparison reviewers. One article was included by a “yes” vote from the third reviewer. The examination of the “maybe” articles resulted in no additional inclusions, and this first search resulted in 9 total articles.

These results underscored two related challenges: 1) the dearth of manuscripts examining sustainability in a sales context and 2) the ambiguity among terms. This led us to broaden our search to include keywords like “corporate social responsibility” and “triple bottom line,” terms which would pull more articles (specifically those with a prosocial focus) into consideration.

This second search, again using the EBSCO database, resulted in 503 papers. A cross-over analysis was conducted to make sure there were no duplicates between the first two searches. We used the same screening procedure, and the initial comparison analysis resulted in 9 divergent reviews, producing an interrater reliability of 98%. Fourteen articles received at least one “yes” vote, and ultimately five were included based on author team scrutiny. One article received a “maybe” but was ultimately excluded. The results of the second search resulted in 8 articles being included into the review.

The author team made additional decisions that may represent limitations and lead to future directions. First, our focus on salespeople excluded 929 articles that investigated some aspect of sustainability and general employees, or employees not related to sales. 488 articles studied CSR-related themes and non-sales employees (e.g., Rahman et al., 2023). For instance, Aguinis and Glavas (2019) tested the impact of CSR on employee work meaningfulness, and while we commend this research, we could not include it in our selection set. Similarly, 68 papers involved general employees and environmental variables, like Paillé and colleagues (2014), who investigate human resource management and environmental performance among CEOs, managers, and frontline employees. These papers varied across industry, journal type, methodology, region, as well as measurement of social or environmental sustainability. The remaining 373 articles discussed sustainability, but did not deal with salespeople in any way.

Second, 68 articles were excluded because the study examined frontline exchanges between employees and customers—but not a sales interaction. These papers included industries where frontline service was provided, such as hotel and tourism (Font and McCabe 2017; Chou et al., 2022) and healthcare (Borin et al., 2020). Another limitation was journal type. Indeed, we excluded 17 articles that did examine salespeople and sustainability because they were from

journals like *Sustainability* or MDPI journals. These have a high publication citation rate, but can be seen as less reliable given their “pay to publish” model.

Third, a small but not insignificant portion had samples consisting of some but not all salespeople. For instance, David, Kim and Rodgers (2021) conducted a survey of employees which included “research and development, marketing and sales, customer service, administration, and operations” (p. 1516). The argument could be made that marketing and sales qualifies for inclusion in our analysis, and customer service could be a frontline interaction, but the sample is ambiguous. Another example is Aboelmaged (2018) who used a sample consisting of 14.8% sales and marketing employees. After deliberation, the author team decided that to include such studies would misrepresent our review of the sales profession. For example, David and colleagues (2021) found that job performance was influenced by a competitive climate and helping motives, but it would be invalid to ascribe that relationship to employees in a sales role.

One limitation we were able to amend was the use of EBSCO as the sole database. Therefore, to ensure completeness, each author conducted an independent search using Google Scholar. Through this search, 6 additional articles were deemed worthy of inclusion in this review. As a final step, we searched the Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management website, finding one conceptual paper about social responsibility deemed appropriate for inclusion. In sum, our examination of 1016 articles, plus our additional search, produced a final count of 24 articles. Table 2 provides a snapshot of the 19 empirical articles (5 were conceptual). This table highlights the focal constructs and context of each article. It also shows how each article assessed salesperson characteristics and cultural variables, as well as the role of salespeople, managers, organizations, and customers in the studies.

The web appendix contains three tables based on the 24 articles reviewed. The first displays antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes of the empirical studies (Table A1). The second presents the research focus, theory, theme, method/sample, and key findings (Table A2). The third details managerial implications and future research suggestions (Table A3).

Insert Table 2 About Here

2.3. Article Synthesis

The goal of this section is to synthesize the articles to reveal commonalities among the 24 papers. While some research takes a “decade view” to understand key periods, almost all of our articles are within the previous decade. After multiple discussions and three iterations of combining papers around topic areas, we arrived at two key themes, which align with the sustainability (and TBL) framework. More specifically, our themes correspond with two major approaches to sustainable business: 1) firms that concentrate their efforts onto either environmental or social responsibility and 2) firms that allocate effort across both. Here we should note that there are many descriptors of the three components (e.g., people, planet, and profit; social, environmental, and economic performance; CSR, green marketing, and profitability). Taking a stakeholder approach, we view each vector as a responsibility to a set of stakeholders, and define our constructs as follows. Social responsibility is a firm’s efforts to prioritize non-economic and non-environmental stakeholders, such as the local community, society-at-large, and employees. Environmental responsibility is a firm’s efforts to prioritize non-economic and non-social stakeholders, namely the natural environment, which consists of the atmosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere. Finally, economic responsibility is a firm’s efforts to prioritize non-environmental and non-social stakeholders, such as shareholders, private investors, and company executives (Note: executives are employees, and we explore how

firms should think about these stakeholders in later sections). Importantly, it is our assertion that—unless explicitly stated—all sales research considers economic responsibility. Meaning, even articles that discuss social or environmental responsibility are inherently seeking to satisfy economic demands.

Therefore, we categorize our themes based on where firms under investigation focus their sustainability attention. Firms that exert effort toward performance along either the environmental vector or the social vector we label as having a ‘single focus’. These papers may examine how a firm’s environmental orientation is interpreted by salespeople or how social initiatives enhance salesperson performance; but they do not investigate both. Our second theme does just that, and therefore we label this theme ‘dual focus’. In these papers, the authors investigate organizations that incorporate both a social and environmental initiative into their firm strategy. In sum, theme one involves professional sales and a single focus on either environmental or social aspects of sustainability while theme two combines both vectors. What is truly missing here is a tri-focused approach that considers social, environmental, and economic sustainability within a single study. While all sales research inherently considers economic inputs and outputs, we argue it should be explicitly included in future studies. A complete picture of how all three vectors interconnect and operate will help alleviate the criticism that economic interests may be behind social and environmental sustainability initiatives of sales companies.

2.3.1. Theme: Single Focus

Eleven manuscripts investigated either social or environmental aspects of sustainability and salespeople. Of these, only three examined social programs. (As mentioned, social responsibility is widely studied across employees, but it is underrepresented in sales). Turning first to environmentally-focused papers, many employed an environmental orientation construct,

or something similar. Banerjee (2001; 2002) describes an environmental orientation as having two components: internal and external, which correspond to corporate culture and climate, respectively. If a firm messages to internal constituents that the natural environment is a top priority, it must also demonstrate these priorities through tangible actions (Gabler et al., 2014). Essentially, a firm must walk the walk if it is going to talk the talk, which helps with the trust and authenticity (Casidy and Yan 2022). This construct is common in marketing (Gabler, Richey and Rapp 2015; Gabler, Landers and Richey 2021), management (Menguc and Ozanne 2005; Zameer et al., 2022), and operations and supply chain literature (e.g., Keszei 2020; Köhl et al., 2022), where it is considered a means to competitive advantage.

If companies are building environmental sustainability into their value proposition, it is notable if it is not properly leveraged on the frontline. This is especially pertinent considering the greatest value comes when there is value alignment between salespeople and upper management. The relatively few articles involving environmental orientation show positive effects on salesperson attitudes (Hensen et al., 2016; Gabler et al., 2023), as well as effort and participation (Gabler et al., 2014). Salespeople play a major role in green marketing efforts. Their expertise drives customer satisfaction with green products more than interventions around product pricing, quality, or image (Gelderman et al., 2021). The role of salespeople in their firm's environmental sustainability strategy is vital because a misalignment negatively impacts customers. In a recent study, firms known for being environmentally friendly were perceived as hypocritical by customers when their salespeople engaged in environmentally irresponsible behaviors (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, selling firms should cultivate a climate of environmental stewardship (Hensen et al., 2016). Indeed, when frontline environmental stewards are matched with firm-level eco-capabilities, they find more meaning in their work, which leads to customer satisfaction

(Gabler et al., 2022). This requires investing in the development of eco-capabilities and providing salespeople with necessary resources to ensure the success of such initiatives.

Turning to the three articles examining salespeople and social responsibility, the main insight is simple: salespeople are positively affected by these social firm initiatives. For example, Larson et al. (2008) found that salespeople gain confidence when employing a firm's cause-related marketing strategy to sell. Interestingly, this relationship was moderated by identification, with the influence being stronger when identification with the company was low. Alternatively, Ozhan et al. (2022) showed that salespeople can feel a stronger sense of company identification based on perceptions of CSR initiatives. Clearly, more work is required to understand even one aspect (i.e., identification) of sustainability and sales.

From a theoretical perspective, it is not only important to investigate how sustainability initiatives impact salespeople, but how salespeople drive sustainability efforts of the firm. Given their boundary-spanning role, salespeople could be determinants of the success or failure of such initiatives. It would also help to understand how salespeople perceive social responsibility in comparison to environmental responsibility. This may shape how researchers develop and build constructs for future research. From a managerial perspective, alignment is key. Large differences between salespeople and their firms will result in troublesome outcomes for the organization (e.g., customer dissatisfaction, negative publicity) and the salesperson (e.g., job dissatisfaction, turnover). Salesperson-firm alignment starts by attracting salespeople who share similar values (e.g., environmental stewardship, prosocial identity), hiring these individuals, and training them to strengthen the alignment (e.g., Hensen et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). Moreover, strong communication will help salespeople understand the importance of such initiatives and how they can contribute to them (e.g., Font et al., 2021).

While a single focus may be necessary for firms in the early stages of sustainable strategy, there may be interdependencies between vectors such that investing resources in one has additive effects on the other (an idea we explore in the conclusion). Alternatively, resource limitations may have the opposite effect, meaning resource stretched across both vectors renders neither impactful, and a salesforce without clear direction. The next section explores such cases where salespeople were asked to balance this dual approach.

2.3.2 Theme: Dual Focus

Twelve articles explore sales and both environmental and social responsibility. Three manuscripts used variables like eco-social orientation to encompass this dual focus, while nine use CSR as their focal construct. The difference here—and why these papers were included in this theme and not the previous—is that these conceptualizations of CSR included environmental aspects. This demonstrates that the struggle to adopt and utilize consistent terminology is not over. Generally, when social and environmental aspects were combined, salespeople responded favorably across attitudes, behaviors, and performance. For example, CSR initiatives led to increased salesperson identification with the organization—and customers (Korschun et al., 2014), which resulted in higher levels of sales performance. Sales outcomes increased through other mechanisms as well, such as pride (Castro-González et al., 2022). A dual focus on environmental and social initiatives also led to commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors (Castro-González et al., 2019; Castro-González et al., 2022). Indeed, most studies showed an amplification of sales outcomes spurred by sustainability initiatives (e.g., Nickerson et al., 2022). In one study, Gabler and his colleagues (2020) compared salesperson perceptions of their firm's environmental versus social priorities. They found environmental orientation impacted sales performance while social values increased job satisfaction and positive word-of-

mouth. Vlachos et al. (2014) showed that corporate social performance affects salesperson behaviors such as intentions to stay and positive recommendations. Vizcaíno et al. (2021) uncovered that servant leadership plays a role in maximizing the outcomes of these initiatives.

Again, the literature here is limited, and so is our understanding of how salespeople interact with both environmental and social policies and practices. Future researchers should investigate boundary conditions around these initiatives, and how they simultaneously impact—and are impacted by—salesperson behaviors. For instance, Font et al. (2021) found that salespeople and their customers can be co-creators of sustainable experiences. Studies could build from this and develop a sustainable selling strategy that adds value throughout the sales process, to the firm and customers alike. In addition, while most studies focused on salesperson outcomes, one overlooked aspect is uncovering the antecedents that drive sustainability initiatives in selling organizations (e.g., Vizcaíno et al., 2021).

For managers, there are massive benefits to be harvested through sustainability initiatives, such as developing sustainable brand champions on the frontline (e.g., Gabler et al., 2020). Firms can do this by enhancing salesperson pride and commitment to the organization (Castro-González et al., 2022). This critical step requires effective communication and reinforcement through interventions and incentives. Salespeople who embrace sustainability are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors that benefit the firm (Vizcaíno et al., 2021), and so managers that can influence their sales teams to do so will reap those rewards.

In sum, the fact that only a dozen papers examine a dual focus means that we lack a meaningful understanding about the role of professional sales within a firm that prioritizes both environmental and social responsibility. The next section helps bridge the gap between this theme and future research recommendations.

3. BRIDGING THE GAP TO FUTURE RESEARCH

In this section, we blend what we know from these 24 articles with broader sustainability business literature to provide a research agenda for sales scholars. At the most basic level, we know: 1) firms derive value through the sales of products and services for profit, 2) customers derive value from buying those products and services from firms (Hunt 1983), 3) at the intersection of that transaction is professional sales, and 4) sustainability is a consideration of both firms and customers. Yet we only have 24 manuscripts that examine this salesperson–customer interaction in a sustainability context. Perhaps that is the most significant finding from our review. Notably, this lack of attention translates to research gaps that are broad relative to more scrutinized aspects of professional selling. For instance, in our review, we uncovered few theory-driven articles, leading to our gap to develop useful theoretical frameworks in this area (Gap 3.1). Next, we did not find many empirical studies addressing how stakeholder demands impact salespeople (Gap 3.2) or how they are expected to manage environmental and social orientations simultaneously (Gap 3.3). Our review also revealed a narrow conceptualization of the social vector, and therefore expansion of this concept (Gap 3.3) is much needed. Finally, we argue the small number of articles with objective measures, and those that integrated technology into their studies, warranted calls for exploration (Gaps 3.5 and 3.6, respectively). Each of the following sections contains a brief overview of one of these research gaps, why it is relevant, and future research recommendations. For Gaps 3.2 – 3.6, we close with specific questions that push forward the conversation around sustainability in the salesforce.

3.1 Gap: Theoretical Frameworks

One of the most conspicuous omissions in the sustainability and sales literature is the lack of theory. Indeed, it is challenging to build a conceptual understanding of a phenomenon without

theoretical frameworks to guide the research. Table A2 in the appendix presents the theory employed by each article reviewed in this manuscript, along with its primary research focus, theme, method/sample, and key findings. To date, Social Identity Theory has been deployed most frequently. Authors have implemented this theory at the micro-level, most often to understand how salespeople and organizations align their values—and, consequently, their identities—toward the same goal (e.g., environmental or social responsibility). The other theoretical domains were macro-level, with authors leveraging the Natural Resource-Based View of the firm, Service Dominant Logic, and Stakeholder Theory. Nevertheless, it is evident that there is no clear theoretical framework to guide this research. We follow the call from Sohi, Haas and Davis (2022) to address the need for more sales-specific theory, and advance that the intersection of sales and sustainability is one such area that requires novel theory development and new ways of thinking. While our study serves as a starting point, Sharma (2020) developed a Classical Sustainability Research Classification Framework, which could be useful as it is relevant to sales research as well as B2B marketing. Together, we argue that there is sufficient support to integrate sales and sustainability into a unifying framework.

Sales scholars can draw from established theories when developing this framework, and one starting point is the TBL mentioned earlier. This framework emphasizes the intriguing challenges that lie not within, but between the areas of environmental, social, and economic bottom lines, representing a way to assess a company's sustainability (Elkington 1998; Norman and MacDonald, 2004). Additionally, sales scholars can explore Systems Theory as a macro perspective that recognizes sustainability as an interconnected phenomenon of social, environmental, and economic systems that mutually influence each other (Clayton and Radcliffe, 1996; Voinov and Farley, 2007). Finally, we also recommend the Social Responsibility

Framework (SRF) for Sales Management developed by LaFleur and Forrest (1991). The authors suggest three components comprise the development of social responsibility in sales: ideology, behavioral philosophy, and motivation; an idea which could help shape theory development.

Given the applicability of social identity theory at the micro-level, and the usefulness of SRF, TBL, Systems and Stakeholder theory at the macro-level, we propose scholars integrate the micro- and macro-level perspectives into the same theoretical framework. This framework would simultaneously: 1) guide decision-making at the executive level, such as the development of firm orientations or sustainability initiatives, 2) inform managerial strategy, such as the hiring and training of salespeople that would optimize these initiatives, and 3) help predict outcomes at the salesperson level, such as how shared identities influence performance. While this process will be iterative and garner disagreement, we posit this too would be beneficial. In short, as sustainability and sales research advances, we suggest scholars focus on theory-building. A multi-level framework like this would help scholars understand the interplay between different stakeholders and provide a prescription for sales organizations attempting to develop sustainability across all three vectors.

3.2 Gap: The Impact of Stakeholder Demands on Salespeople

It is no mystery that different stakeholders have different objectives (Ferrell 2021). Shareholders wish to maximize profitability, customers seek low prices and high quality, and salespeople want optimal performance and satisfaction. As the list of stakeholders increases, so do these demands and potential misalignment. As marketers begin to understand the interrelatedness of stakeholders (Hillebrand et al., 2015), firms must move past the needs of primary stakeholders (e.g., customers, shareholders, managers) to address secondary ones (e.g., local communities, special interest groups). These stakeholders are not essential to the firm's

survival (Polonsky 1995), but because they align with sustainability goals (e.g., society-at-large, the natural environment), they are becoming increasingly important. While research addressing this concern has accelerated, Gabler and colleagues (2020) note that “there is still an opportunity to extend our knowledge of how firms handle dual secondary stakeholder demands.” One strategy might be to shift social and environmental stakeholders from secondary to primary, thus shifting sustainability goals to a matter of firm survival. Leopold (1949) attempted to do this over 70 years ago. His ‘land ethic’ proposed that the planet was the fundamental stakeholder, which theoretically would change the entire business landscape, but in practice has not been actualized. We acknowledge that successful salespeople cannot simply shift focus to what is best for society and the planet, they must add these goals to the existing portfolio of goals for traditional primary stakeholders. Thus, the already complex salesperson role will become even moreso.

Research suggests that salespeople can be overburdened when tasked with doing ‘too much’. If salespeople are responsible for conveying a firm’s sustainability priorities, it is logical to expect an increase in role conflict or ambiguity. A role is defined as “the set of prescriptions defining what the behavior of a position member should be” (Biddle and Thomas, 1966, p. 29). The concept of roles provides scholars the ability to link research between individuals and organizations (Katz and Kahn, 1966), and therefore is crucial in sales research. Role ambiguity occurs when employees are unable to predict the outcome to their behavior (Rizzo, House and Lirtzman 1970). Essentially, the role lacks clarity (Schuler, Aldag and Brief 1977), meaning the individual does not have concrete direction on how to behave or tasks to perform. We suggest this could occur on the frontline of a selling organization if too many sustainability initiatives (or orientations) are adopted.

Role clarity highlights another potential challenge, namely, can salespeople authentically convey multiple stakeholder demands? Consider an environmentally-focused brand that suddenly adopted a secondary, pro-social platform. Would the salesforce be able to convey authenticity and believability for both priorities, or would it be too much emotional labor? Salespeople are often asked to make sure their observable actions and expressions align with those values of the firm (Humphrey et al., 2015). This emotional labor manifests in two ways: deep acting and surface acting (Hochschild 1983). Deep acting is an attempt to actually experience the emotion, which would lead to a more natural demonstration of the appropriate visible behavior (Humphrey 2012). Surface acting, on the other hand, is more about pretending than feeling, and is psychologically less demanding (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Salespeople who engage in deep acting may seem authentically inspired by the cause, but surface actors may come across as disingenuous, which could backfire. Therefore, the intersection of emotional labor and sustainability orientations on the frontline deserves attention.

Researchers could take a page from ambidexterity studies to uncover ways to successfully meet the demands of multiple orientations (Yu et al., 2013). Unlike customer and selling orientations, sustainability-driven orientations are not in competition, so the potential ‘dark side’ described by Gabler and colleagues (2017a) could be avoided. (See more in Gap 3.4). A research agenda built around salespeople managing multiple stakeholders, then, can go beyond sales performance outcomes and cover topics like negotiations, manager support, implementation strategies, and managing networks. Below we offer five research areas with high potential.

1. What strategies do salespeople employ to meet the needs and expectations of multiple stakeholders while also achieving their own sales targets? Are either social or environmental stakeholder demands easier to accommodate?
2. What are the most effective communication and negotiation techniques for managing environmental and social stakeholders alongside traditional stakeholders? How do these

techniques vary depending on the stakeholder's level of power and influence on the salesperson?

3. Do sales organizations run the risk of alienating quality candidates who do not wish to prioritize social or environmental stakeholders? Alternatively, can too many sustainability priorities induce emotional labor, and if so, how will surface and deep acting be interpreted by external stakeholders?
4. How do salespeople prioritize stakeholder demands when they are in opposition with one another, such as when a manager's request conflicts with an environmental policy or an executive decision is socially irresponsible? What factors influence their decision-making process in these situations, and what are the consequences of their choices?
5. How do sales managers support and train their sales teams to effectively manage competing stakeholder demands? What role do training programs, mentoring, coaching, and performance metrics play in developing the skills and knowledge salespeople need to balance them?

3.3 Gap: Expanding the Social Vector

Creating parameters or boundary conditions for the social responsibility vector represents a challenge because it forces the consideration of stakeholder who are simultaneously primary and secondary stakeholders, and requires an assessment across all three vectors. In a basic sense, every human on the planet is a social consideration because they comprise society-at-large. Consider when a firm sells a product to a customer. At face value, this is an economic exchange; however, because that customer (primary stakeholder) is simultaneously part of society (secondary stakeholder), that could be considered social responsibility. More important to this paper, salespeople are the revenue generators and have been traditionally understood to be primary stakeholders in terms of what they provide the firm (e.g., labor) versus what the firm provides them (e.g., salary, benefits). However, like customers, they are also people, and so they span both the economic and social vectors. As such, a firm's treatment of its salespeople could be considered social responsibility.

It is possible to show how expanding the social vector leads to performance across all three. For instance, Gabler, Itani, and Agnihotri (2022) found an association between environmental orientation and work meaningfulness, which led to salesperson brand advocacy and customer satisfaction. This could be considered the intersection of all three vectors: 1) environmental (firm-level orientation and salesperson-level value); 2) social (meaningful salesperson work and customer satisfaction); and 3) economic (salesperson brand advocates).

Work meaningfulness represents just one component of employee well-being. It includes other intrinsic factors like job satisfaction, top management support, and employee relationships, but also extrinsic job factors like parental leave, volunteer programs, salary, and benefits. We argue that well-being *should* be a sustainability issue along the social responsibility vector, and that perhaps it could lead to positive firm outcomes. In the same way environmental packaging can increase consumer attitudes toward a brand (Martins 2023), employee well-being metrics may positively influence buyer intentions. For instance, labels that highlight social programs or employee job satisfaction rates may garner support from consumers who identify more with the social vector of sustainability than the environmental.

As companies strive to improve their sustainability performance, it is also important to recognize the intersectionality of different social issues, including LGBTQ+ as well as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). These topics are another under researched area in sales, and in business in general. A diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace is a socially just workplace, which we assert is a precursor to employee well-being. The entire salesforce can only thrive if there is a baseline level of respect shown across all genders, races, ethnicities, and orientations. Prioritizing LGBTQ+ and DEI programs seems to be a necessary but not sufficient criterion for employee well-being, and this represents another opportunity for sales scholars to push the

boundary on important social issues. We suggest these are also components of the social vector and offer the following specific suggestions.

1. What responsibility do firms have to ensure employee well-being, and should this be considered independent of, or integral to, sustainable strategy? What variables should scholars investigate that may influence well-being?
2. How does promoting employee well-being contribute to sales outcomes? How do external stakeholders perceive companies that prioritize employee well-being as a sustainability issue?
3. How can firms turn employee well-being into a competitive advantage? Does advertising (e.g., packaging) social programs that underscore a commitment to employee well-being influence consumer attitudes and behaviors?
4. How do LGBTQ+ and DEI initiatives intersect with employee well-being? Do firms that prioritize the former see an impact on the latter, and what spillover effects occur?
5. What are the bridges and barriers to integrating LGBTQ+ and DEI into frontline strategy? What metrics and evaluation frameworks are most appropriate for assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives, and how can organizations use this data to improve?
6. What are the current challenges that LGBTQ+ individuals face in the sales profession, and what are the resulting outcomes? What strategies can sales organizations implement to overcome these challenges and promote greater DEI for LGBTQ+ employees? Is there a 'dark side' to overemphasizing these initiatives (e.g., employee backlash), and how can firms address socially, culturally, or politically conservative mentalities?
7. How do sales organizations develop and implement training programs for promoting DEI, including LGBTQ+ inclusion? What factors influence the effectiveness of these programs, such as the content, delivery method, and employee engagement, and how can organizations optimize these factors?

3.4 Gap: Building an Eco-Social Orientation

Building from our previous gap, we still do not have a valid social orientation construct, and therefore, our ability to investigate the social vector is limited compared to the environmental vector. Social orientation is not absent from the literature, and like environmental orientation, has been employed in scholarship for over 20 years (e.g., Marz et al., 2003). But unlike its counterpart, social orientation has been used sparingly in business research. This

represents a vast area of exploration, and one where sales scholars could lead the way. We suggest the development of the construct that mimics environmental orientation with internal and external components and corresponding items. This would allow for more exploration into Theme 2, the dual approach to sales and sustainability.

The next step would be combining these orientations in the same study. Gabler, Landers and Rapp (2020) attempted this, positioning a pro-social organizational identity alongside environmental orientation. However, a true orientation would greatly expand how we measure and understand sustainability in sales. Gabler, Landers and Richey (2021) developed a social orientation construct by combining prosocial organizational identity and prosocial impact (Grant et al., 2008). The authors then operationalized their newly developed construct with environmental orientation to create an eco-social orientation. However, they note that “While environmental orientation has been validated in the literature, its social counterpart needs to be studied more so that the dual orientation variable can be utilized in future research” (Gabler, Landers and Richey (2021, p. 1170). Environmental orientation conveys to internal and external stakeholders that the natural environment is a priority of the focal firm (Banerjee 2002), which is reflected in the environmental orientation scale. Using prosocial organizational identity and prosocial impact as a proxy for social orientation is a good start, but we suggest scholars develop and test a social orientation scale that mirrors the environmental one validated in the literature.

Finally, as noted earlier, the economic component of sustainability could be understood to be assumed under any business model operating in today’s marketplace—especially within sales organizations. Still, just as we argue for the development of a social orientation construct, an economic orientation construct would be a useful tool to assess an organization’s priorities. Just as salespeople have to manage different stakeholders, firms have to manage multiple

orientations. We believe that future research that seeks to understand the interplay of orientations, and not treat them in silos, is of importance. Therefore, we offer the following research questions as a potentially robust avenue for exploration.

1. How would a social and environmental orientation affect salesperson performance across traditional and non-traditional outcomes? Are sales organizations that prioritize social and environmental goals more successful in the long term than those that prioritize financial goals alone?
2. What are the key drivers of a social and environmental orientation being embraced on the frontline? How do customers respond to salespeople who actively convey an eco-social orientation? How do salespeople balance the trade-offs among environmental, social, and economic sustainability in practice?
3. Can scholars develop a more holistic and integrated approach to measuring all aspects of sustainability on the frontline? What are the challenges associated with implementing a social and environmental orientation on the frontline? What negative consequences (e.g., role ambiguity) could occur for salespeople?
4. What are the key challenges associated with developing a multi-faceted orientation on the frontline? How do these challenges vary depending on the industry, region, and firm size, and what are the implications of these differences?
5. Are there industries where the pursuit of one vector is more beneficial than both? Which stakeholders should be involved in decisions to pursue one or both vectors? How can firms identify which vector is more important to its customer base and what means of tracking and reporting will help them pivot strategies in the future?

3.5 Gap: Objective Performance Data

As seen by the papers included in our review, much sustainability research utilizes self-reported, subjective-level data. Measures like sales performance and customer satisfaction are useful, but as more data becomes available, it is incumbent on scholars to show how, for instance, adopting an environmental orientation leads to sales conversion rates. But more than that, constructs like environmental orientation require objective complements. Perceptual data is useful—and necessary—but impartial metrics would add validity to empirical findings. Next,

while sustainability research is not in its infancy, it is difficult to measure the long-term consequences of strategies. At this point, we cannot assess how programs impact the firm over time simply because that data does not exist. This could be a silver lining to sustainability and sales research, as indicators could be collected at regular intervals. Longitudinal studies would be extremely valuable for salespeople who could calibrate their behaviors to optimal levels based on cumulative data. There needs to be a focus on improving data quality to show the economic impact of sustainability initiatives. These questions can drive this investigation.

1. How accurate and reliable are self-reported data on sustainability initiatives in sales organizations? What factors influence the validity and reliability of these data, and how can researchers mitigate potential biases and errors in their analyses? Can we identify and mitigate potential biases and errors in these data?
2. What are the most effective methods for collecting objective data on sustainability and sales practices, and how do these methods compare to self-reported data? How can researchers balance the trade-off between the time and cost involved in collecting objective data and the potential benefits of greater accuracy and reliability?
3. How do differences in national cultures and regulatory environments affect the validity and reliability of self-reported data on sustainability and sales practices? Are certain countries or regions more prone to bias and error in their self-reported data, and if so, why?
4. How do the limitations of self-reported data on sustainability and sales practices impact the validity and generalizability of research findings in this area? What are the implications of these limitations for policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders who rely on these findings to make decisions and develop policies related to sustainability and sales?
5. What longitudinal information would be most valuable in keeping and retaining salespeople who embrace sustainability initiatives? What intervals would be most effective for measuring the long-term effects of sustainability initiatives on a sales force?

3.6 Gap: The Intersection of Technology and Sustainability

Technology is integral to sales. From customer relationship technology (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2007; Avlonitis and Panagopoulos 2005) to social media adoption (e.g., Ogilvie et al., 2018;

Marshall et al., 2012), to virtual agents and augmented reality (e.g., Saad and Choura 2023; Alavi and Habel 2021), the most productive sales organizations leverage the latest technology effectively (Agnihotri 2021; Chaker et al., 2022). Popular press studies show that 44% of CEOs note a lack of insights from data and while 35% name technological barriers as key challenges to achieving their sustainability objectives (IBM Newsroom 2022). The problem seems simple at first, but underscores a complexity: how can sales organizations gain insights from a technology they are having difficulty achieving?

The adoption of new technologies is often seen as a driver of sustainability (Gil-Gomez et al., 2020), and research shows how sustainable innovation impacts TBL performance across business units (Weidner, Nakata, and Zhu 2021). However, little research measures the interactive effects of technology adoption and sustainability initiatives in a professional sales context. Future research should shed light on the factors that influence the adoption of sustainable technologies on the frontline, and how it influences behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. Questions include:

1. How can sales organizations effectively leverage technology to enhance their sustainability performance? What factors influence the adoption and implementation of sustainable technology in sales organizations, such as cost, complexity, and organizational culture?
2. What are the benefits associated with sustainable technology adoption on the frontline, such as reduced carbon footprint and increased efficiency? How can organizations balance these benefits and risks to optimize their sustainability outcomes and business performance?
3. What are the risks associated with sustainable technology adoption on the frontline, such as reduced carbon footprint and increased efficiency? Is there a potential dark side (i.e., negative consequences) to technology adoption on the frontline, such as job obsolescence (e.g., salesperson replacement by artificial intelligence) or an overreliance on technology?

4. How can organizations balance these benefits and risks to optimize their sustainability outcomes and business performance?
5. What is the role of industry in sustainable technology in sales organizations? Do attributes like firm size, scale, region, or product category influence how these technologies are utilized salespeople or expected by customers?

4. CONCLUSION

Sustainability has moved from a pure ethical issue in business to a differentiator (e.g., Albertini, 2019; Gabler et al., 2023). Once up for debate (Gabler et al., 2017b), it is now clear that adopting sustainability into business strategy has benefits for the focal firm (White et al., 2019). The Financial Bottom Line is no longer a comprehensive metric of firm success (Ferrell 2021), and sustainable business practice entails that firms sell products for not just profit but for the betterment of their employees, other firms, and society (Lunde 2018). Salespeople are on the frontline of this new paradigm, but to this point, sales scholars have not been.

This represents an opportunity and a new way of thinking. The first step is understanding the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental problems—and how we are uniquely positioned to address them in the sales domain. As Greta Thunberg said, “the fight for social justice is the fight for climate justice.” Not only do social and environmental obstacles go hand-in-hand, there is a snowball effect, or as Harder (2020) puts it, “climate change feeds off itself and gets even worse.” Essentially, one problem exacerbates another and creates a cycle. One example is that the warmer climate increases air conditioning usage, which creates more greenhouse gasses that further warm the planet. By embracing environmental policies (e.g., renewable energy investments, carbon neutrality agreements), firms are achieving social responsibility goals. For instance, if airlines agree to go carbon neutral (Delta says they will be the first to do so by 2030), they will influence social outcomes. This is not accidental, but by

design. Airlines account for 2-3% of carbon dioxide emissions worldwide (Ritchie 2020). These emissions are a huge contributor to air pollution, which causes 5.5 million premature deaths annually (Roser 2021), thus Delta's environmental initiative—it could be argued—is actually a social one. Similarly, social programs influence environmental outcomes. Consider a gamified health and well-being program within a firm where employees get rewarded for volunteering, healthy eating, gym memberships, and physical screenings. These healthier (mentally and physically) employees will be a lesser strain on the healthcare system, which requires energy and creates pollution. Moreover, because sustainability is also economic performance, happier employees stay longer in an organization, which benefits the focal firm. From a macroeconomic perspective, it allows those individuals to spend money on things other than healthcare.

As noted, the salesforce is responsible for conveying the importance of sustainability to consumers. As Gabler and colleagues (2022) note, “too often in a triple bottom line or sustainability context, social responsibility takes a backseat to its environmental counterpart” (p. 21). It is up to a well-trained team to show the interconnectedness of the social and environmental goals. In one sense, this presents a challenge as it requires more creative techniques to bundle the two benefits into a single value proposition. However, looked at another way, it could make the salesperson's job easier. The product is the same, but the salesperson has unlocked additional benefits. Salespeople are consistently selling multiple benefits for the same offering, but we posit sales organizations have not adequately sold both environmental and social attributes of the same offering, thus not actualizing their full potential.

While our review focused was the integration of sustainability into the professional selling function, certainly this involves more than the selling of products and services. Given the boundary-spanning nature of salespeople, the interplay with customers and other organizational

members is one intersection that deserves attention. As discussed, salespeople are responsible for conveying sustainability initiatives, but top management usually develops the initiatives.

Consider a firm that deploys electric vehicles for its salesforce. Unlike an environmental orientation, the salesperson does not communicate this initiative to customers. This type of initiative bypasses the salesperson's interpretation, and it may offer a more objective measure as called for earlier. Therefore, we recommend sales scholars broaden their interpretation of sustainability in sales to include intrafirm relationships.

The other side of the boundary-spanning dyad is the customer, and here we offer a different recommendation. Business research has long positioned well-being as an important outcome, placing value not just on product cost versus quality, but recognizing that firm decisions impact attitudinal, mental, psychological, and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Sirgy and Lee 2008; Sirgy, Lee and Rahtz 2007). Consumer behavior literature developed the transformative consumer research domain to spotlight the importance of consumer well-being (Mick 2006), and service scholars extended this idea to transformative service research (Anderson et al., 2013). Frontline workers often balance service obligations with sales goals, meaning transformative sales research is a logical extension. Just as consumers lack complete control within a service encounter (Anderson et al., 2013), which creates vulnerability (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005) we advance a similar vulnerability in the sales context as customers do not have complete agency in the outcome of the exchange. Further, as noted, sales research could lead the way in a discussion of integrating LGBTQ+ and DEI initiatives into the well-being literature—for both employees and consumers. Sales scholars should develop a framework that tracks how the interactions of sales entities and consumers influences well-being indicators for both parties. Sustainability is naturally tied to well-being, and the development of a Transformative Sales

Research (TSaR) domain may reveal previously undiscovered positive outcomes of integrating sustainability into professional selling.

In the same way salespeople work at the intersection of firms and customers, sales scholars need to work at the intersection of sustainability and professional selling. Twenty-four papers are not enough to shed meaningful light onto the challenges and opportunities. Only two articles from JPSSM were included in our review, leaving a bounty of potential research directions. While it is the job of sales managers to hire and train their frontline, it is the job of sales scholars to empirically validate the attributes of sustainable offerings, to uncover which customers prefer which benefits, what messaging works for each vector of sustainability, and how different stakeholders respond to messaging. The questions posed here just scratch the surface of possible research avenues, and we urge more work in this critical overlap between sustainability and professional sales.

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Figure 1. Hierarchy of Sustainability Strategies

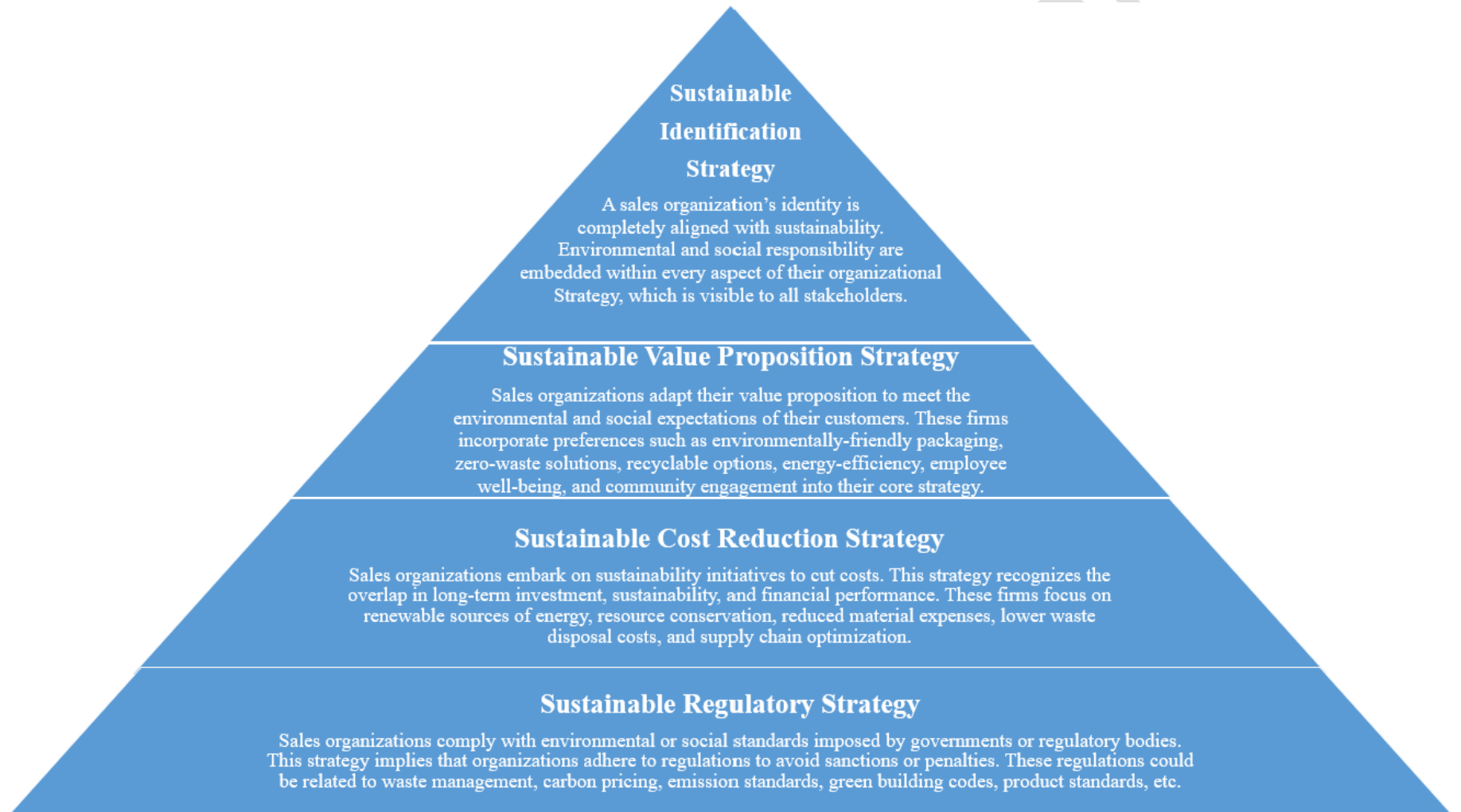


Figure 2: Literature Search and Selection Process

Search Phase		Database	Search Criteria	Search Fields	Search Results	Restrictions	Articles Selected
1	Database Search	EBSCO	Sustainability and Sales	Title, Abstract, and Key Words	513	Peer Reviewed Journals, No Predatory Journals, English Language Only, Article Relevance	9
2	Database Search	EBSCO	Corporate Social Responsibility and Sales		503		8
3	Free Search	Google Scholar	Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Sales		9		7

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Figure 3: Detailed Process for the Inclusions of the Publications

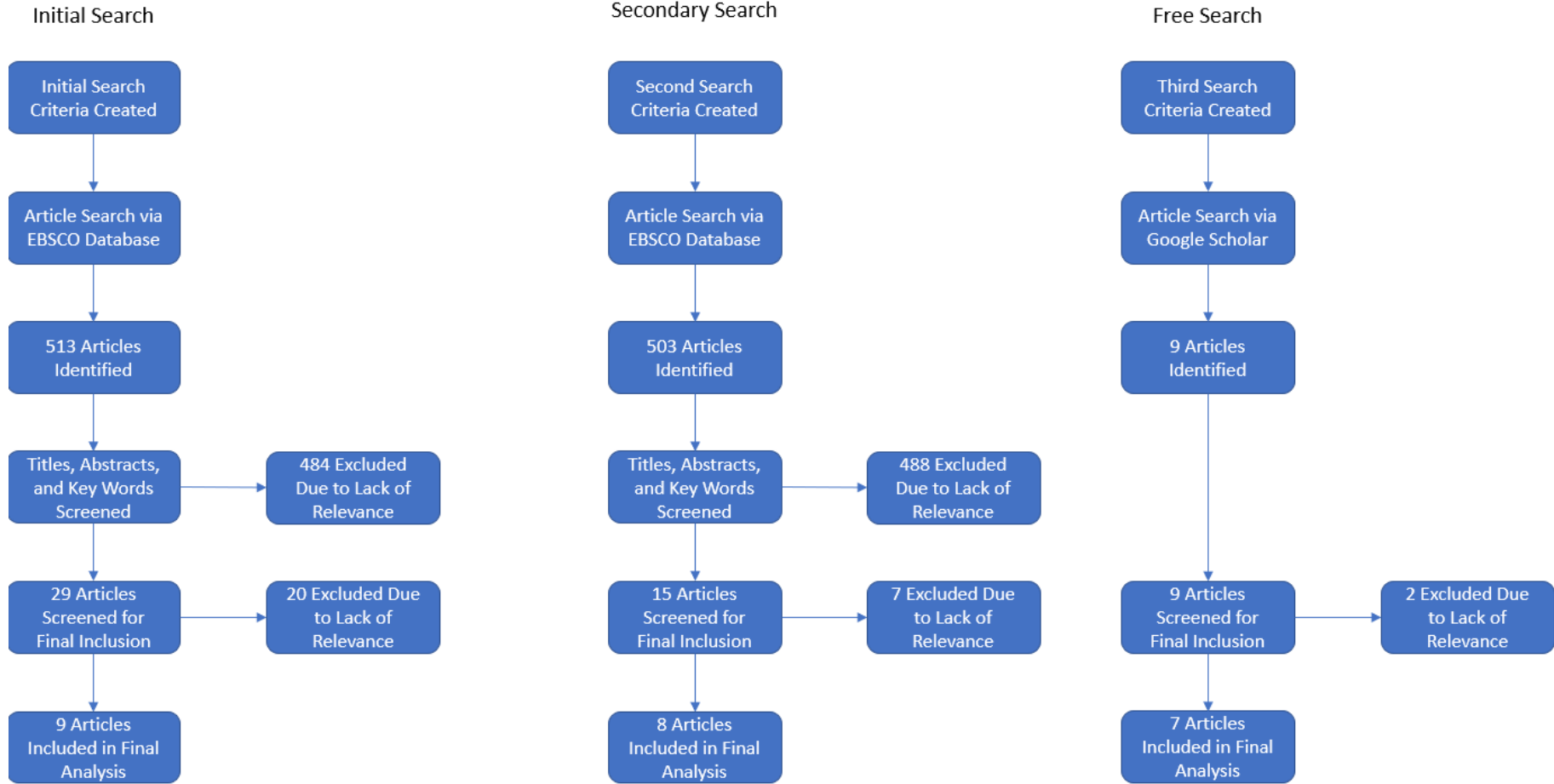


Table 1. Keyword Terms for Article Search

Terms for Sustainability	Terms for Sales
“sustainability” OR “environmental orientation” OR “environmental corporate culture” OR “environmental organizational culture” OR “environmental culture” OR “eco-orientation” OR “green orientation” OR “CSR” or “Corporate Social Responsibility” or “sustainable” OR “Triple Bottom Line” OR “TBL” OR “green” OR “green marketing” OR “eco-social” OR "ecological" OR "social" OR "social orientation" OR "pro-social" OR "prosocial"	“salesperson” OR “salespeople” OR “frontline employee” OR “sales force” OR “salesforce” OR “sales team” OR “sales team” OR “sales associate” “sales- service employee” OR “service-sales employee” OR “sales-service worker” OR “service-sales worker” OR “retail” OR “service” OR “frontline” OR “boundary- spanner” OR "sales professional" OR "FLE" OR "employee" OR "worker"

Table 2. Snapshot of Empirical Articles

Article	Effect of sustainability on salespeople	Effect of sustainability on sales outcomes	Effect of sustainability on customers	Salespeople characteristics	Manager role	Organization role	Customer role	Salespeople role in sustainability	Cultural-level variables role
Gabler et al., 2023	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
Castro-González et al., 2022	✓	✓			✓				
Gabler et al., 2022	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Nickerson et al., 2022		✓	✓			✓			✓
Ozhan et al., 2022	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
Font et al., 2021		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Gelderman et al., 2021		✓	✓	✓		✓			
Vizcaíno et al., 2021		✓			✓	✓		✓	
Gabler et al., 2020	✓	✓				✓			
Zhang et al., 2020		✓	✓	✓				✓	
Castro-González et al., 2019	✓	✓			✓	✓			
Castro-González & Bande, 2019	✓	✓			✓				
Müller et al., 2017		✓	✓			✓	✓		
Hensen et al., 2016	✓	✓		✓	✓				
Gabler et al., 2014	✓	✓		✓					
Korschun et al., 2014	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Vlachos et al., 2014	✓			✓					✓
Vlachos et al., 2010	✓					✓			
Larson et al., 2008	✓	✓		✓					

Note: ✓ The article includes the effect or role assigned

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