Interactional Dynamics of Resistance in B2B Cold Calling

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Abstract
This study explores resistance in business-to-business “cold” sales calls using conversation analysis. By analyzing 162 recorded sales calls, we identify two primary practices—blocks and stalls—that prospects use to resist sales attempts. Blocks involve attempts to terminate the interaction, while stalls delay the sales process. Our findings highlight resistance as an interactive accomplishment rather than a cognitive process, offering new insights into the dynamics of sales encounters. These insights have significant implications for enhancing sales training and improving salesperson-client interactions.

Keywords: customer resistance, conversation analysis, B2B sales calls

1. Introduction
In the realm of business-to-business sales, “cold” calls represent a high-stakes environment where salespeople must persuade prospects to commit to a sales meeting. This resistance becomes particularly evident in situations where the sales process is initiated solely by the salesperson, as seen in “cold” sales calls. In these circumstances, potential customers, often referred to as “prospects”, tend to exhibit higher levels of resistance towards the sales pitch, frequently attempting to end the interaction (De Stefani, 2018; Huma, 2018; Mazeland, 2004; Woodcock, 2017). However, resistance from prospects is a common challenge that salespeople face. Understanding how this resistance is manifested and managed in real-life interactions is crucial for developing effective sales strategies.

This paper aims to investigate the communicative practices through which resistance occurs in “cold” sales calls. By employing conversation analysis (CA), we analyze 162 recorded sales calls to identify the specific ways prospects resist sales attempts. Our study focuses on two primary practices: blocks, where prospects attempt to end the interaction, and stalls, where they delay the scheduling of a meeting. We situate our findings within the broader framework of conversation analysis, particularly regarding progressivity in interactions. Our focus is on how participants advance their courses of action (Stivers & Robinson, 2006) and utilize extra-sequential resources specific to the context of the “cold” call to impede progressivity (Raymond & Zimmerman, 2016).

Through this analysis, we aim to provide a detailed understanding of resistance as an
interactional accomplishment. This perspective shifts the focus from cognitive explanations of resistance to the practical ways in which it is enacted in conversation. Our findings have important implications for both the theoretical understanding of resistance and the practical training of sales professionals.

In the following sections, we review the existing literature on resistance in sales interactions, outline our methodological approach, present our findings on blocks and stalls, and discuss the implications of our study. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for future research in this area.

2. Resistance as an Interactive Achievement

Conversation analysts have found that social interactions consist of distinct courses of action implemented through orderly sequences of talk, collaboratively produced by participants (Schegloff, 2007). For example, larger commercial interactions, such as business negotiations (Niemi & Hirvonen, 2018) or “cold” sales calls, involve multiple sequences of talk through which sales-oriented activities are carried out (De Stefani, 2018).

The sequences like requests and their responses are defined as “adjacency pairs”, consisting of a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP). Requests can be granted or refused, with the former being the “preferred” SPP and the latter the “dispreferred” SPP. The former one, such as granting a request, aligns with the FPP and supports the action initiated by it. Conversely, the latter one, such as refusing a request, misaligns with the FPP; hindering the ongoing course of action. Preferred SPPs are affiliative, fostering collaboration, while dispreferred SPPs are disaffiliative, impeding progress (Schegloff, 2007).

Dispreferred SPPs, including refusals and disagreements, are effective tools for accomplishing resistance (Muntigl, 2013) as they disrupt the progression of the interaction. Conversational progressivity refers to the smooth transition from one unit of talk to the next without delays or disruptions (Schegloff, 2007). Resistance can also be manifested through practices that slow down interaction progress, such as silences, laughter, and turn-initial particles (Heritage, 1998); hinder the accomplishment of the action, such as through misaligned SPPs; or divert the interaction, through challenges or counters (Clift & Pino, 2020).

To date, research on resistance in commercial encounters has mainly focused on resistance within sequences and activities. Both Mazeland’s (2004) and De Stefani’s (2018) studies highlight that in resisting, prospects treat the commercial context of the call as objectionable, blocking the projected purchase of goods or services. Our study builds on these insights by systematically investigating the practices prospects use to block sales and how these practices relate to the overall sales process in “cold” calls. Additionally, we identify a new type of resistance—stalling—where prospects attempt to slow down the sales process rather than outright blocking it, thereby drawing out the interaction and delaying progress.

Previous studies provide the foundation for our empirical analysis, where we explore these resistance practices in greater detail, contributing to a deeper understanding of how resistance is constructed and managed in real-life sales encounters.

3. Data and Method

Our study draws on data from two corpora of business-to-business (B2B) “cold” calls initiated by salespeople from catering companies providing investment consultation. The combined corpus consists of 160 calls, totaling approximately 20 hours of sales conversations involving 20 salespeople from two different companies. These calls, recorded between 2020 and 2024 for training and research purposes by the respective companies, were subsequently shared with us. The parties involved in the recorded phone calls have signed informed consent forms.

The transcription process was two-fold. Initially, a transcription service produced verbatim transcripts of all calls, which facilitated our preliminary inspection of the data. Following this, we transcribed all segments that featured potential instances of resistance using Jefferson’s transcription conventions, specifically developed for conversation analysis (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017). During this phase, any identity-related information in the transcripts was anonymized by replacing real names with pseudonyms.

Our analysis was conducted according to the methodologies of conversation analysis (CA). The process began with building a comprehensive collection of all instances where
resistance to the sales activity was potentially displayed. We then performed a detailed, line-by-line analysis of these selected extracts, focusing on sequence organization (Schegloff, 2007) and turn design (Drew, 2013). Through this meticulous examination, we identified two primary resistance practices: blocks and stalls. In this way, we ensure a rigorous and comprehensive exploration of how resistance is interactionally accomplished in real-life sales contexts, contributing valuable insights to the fields of conversation analysis.

4. Analysis

This section documents how resistance is practically accomplished in “cold” calls through blocks and stalls. Blocks, examined first, hinder the ongoing course of action by delivering a dispreferred response while also attempting to close down the call. Stalls, examined second, frustrate the ongoing course of action through the production of hedged or non-straightforward responses followed by alternative proposals that attempt to delay or divert the progress of the sale, thus threatening its chances of success.

4.1 Resisting by Blocking the Progress of the Sale

We begin by highlighting the key characteristics of sales blocks, using Extract 1 from a “cold” call to a potential customer as our basis.

4.1.1 Justification

Extract 1 [OUC-DMC-HZX_LiuZhe-Ma_0000-0026]

01 Customer: >Hello< ↑.
02 Salesperson: Ah, I’m from the <Baizouji Durian Stinky Tofu> project headquarters ↑ ,
03 and [right now, ↓
04 Customer: [Oh, I can’t deal with this right now, let’s talk in a couple of days.
05 ((background noise))((1))
06 Salesperson: When would you be: available?
07 (0.3)
08 Customer: I: have a store here these days:, I’m finishing up some things here first.
09 (0.3)
10 Salesperson: So, you’re not considering this in the near future, right?
11 Customer: Right, I’ll think about it next month when I’m done here, [next month.
12 Salesperson: [Alright, bye-bye.
13 Customer: Okay.

In this conversation, a salesperson from a project headquarters, identified as Baizouji Durian Stinky Tofu, initiates a cold call to a potential customer. The salesperson’s goal is to introduce the project and possibly schedule a follow-up interaction or sale. However, the customer exhibits resistance early in the conversation.

The salesperson begins with a brief introduction of the project. This introduction sets the stage for the sales pitch, aligning with common business-to-business (B2B) cold call practices aimed at gathering interest and engaging the prospect.

In line 04, the customer interrupts, “Oh, I can’t deal with this these days. Let’s talk in a couple of days“, which assert control over the conversation and halt the salesperson’s planned sequence of information delivery. In terms of turn design, the use of pauses and hesitation markers “oh” adds to the dispreferred nature of the response. It conveys reluctance and reinforces the block without outright rejecting the interaction, making the refusal more polite yet firm. Moreover, the customer provides an immediate reason for the inability to engage, stating they are currently too busy. This justification is crucial in establishing the legitimacy of the block. It symbolizes that the prospect’s current priorities take precedence over the sales pitch. By suggesting a future time (“Let’s talk in a couple of days“), the customer not only blocks the current attempt but also delays the potential engagement to an unspecified future. This tactic introduces ambiguity and creates a temporal distance, reducing the immediacy of the salesperson’s objective.

As for the sequence management, the customer’s block alters the sequence of the conversation. The salesperson, acknowledging the block, shifts from pitching the project to inquiring about a more convenient time. This shift demonstrates the effectiveness of the block in changing the interactional trajectory.

In conclusion, through interruptions, immediate justifications, and suggestions of future engagement, customers effectively manage the conversation to avoid unwanted commitments (Heritage, 2015). For sales professionals, relevant training can include techniques for gently challenging or bypassing blocks, such as
offering quick and relevant information that might pique the customer's interest despite their initial resistance.

4.1.2 Future Contact Arrangements

Extract 2 [OUC-DMC-HZX_Liu Zhe-Xiao Yupeng_0000-0101]

14 Salesperson: Hmm, uh-do you have plans to open a store?
15 (0.6)
16 Customer: I want to inquire about it.
17 (0.4)
18 Salesperson: Ah, mainly, what aspect do you want to know about?
19 I can give you a targeted introduction, so you can get a better understanding.
20 (0.2)
21 Customer: Uh, can you add me on WeChat?
22 (0.4)
23 Salesperson: Uh, <sure::>
24 But just looking at the information, you might not understand much::<
25 (0.2)
26 Customer: Well, talking on the phone, I can't understand much either. ((laughter))
27 Salesperson: Ah, alright, goodbye.

In this excerpt, a salesperson is engaging with a customer who has shown some interest in opening a store.

From lines 14 to 20, the salesperson begins by inquiring about the customer's plans to open a store, followed by a targeted question to understand the specific aspects the customer is interested in. The salesperson's goal is to provide detailed and relevant information to facilitate the sales. However, the customer responds in line 21 with, “Uh, can you add me on WeChat?” This response serves as a blocking tactic to resist the salesperson's attempt to continue the conversation in the current context. The occurrence of “Uh” indicates hesitation and hedging, which projects a dispreferred response (Schegloff, 2007). This subtle cue suggests reluctance to continue the conversation as directed by the salesperson. By shifting the interaction to WeChat, the customer disaligns with the prior speaker and effectively diverts the immediate sales dialogue (Steensig, 2013). This move destroys the progression of the sales process, placing the control back with the customer.

In conclusion, through interruptions, immediate justifications, and suggestions of future engagement, customers effectively manage the conversation to avoid unwanted commitments. For sales professionals, understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more adaptive and responsive sales strategies. On the one hand, by identifying the signs of a block, salespeople can adapt their strategies, perhaps by acknowledging the customer's current priorities and proposing more flexible engagement options. On the other hand, recognizing blocking tactics like the one employed by the customer in line 21, salespeople can offer to continue the conversation on WeChat but also scheduling a follow-up call to ensure the sales process progresses.

While resistance by blocking the initiating action can abruptly halt the sales process, stalling offers a more subtle form of resistance. Stalling seemingly allows the sales conversation to continue, yet it slows down its progress and can divert its trajectory. In the following analysis, we will explore how customers use stalling tactics to delay and complicate the sales process without directly rejecting the salesperson's proposals.

4.2 Resisting by Stalling the Progress of the Sale

By employing stalling tactics, prospects disrupt the momentum of the sales process. For example, when a salesperson suggests a face-to-face meeting for a product presentation, the prospect might request more relevant information.

Although the prospect does not reject the idea of receiving information, the alternative they suggest is less favorable for advancing the sale. Stalls introduce several challenges, such as slowing down the sales process and prolonging it indefinitely while the salesperson awaits a response. Consequently, salespeople often view these stalling tactics as sub-optimal and try to propose alternatives that can expedite the process and ensure its success.

4.2.1 Topic Shift

Extract 3 [OUC-DMC-HZX_Liu Zhe-Lei Yiqiang_0000-0814]

86 Salesperson: You don't have it in Fuzhou, you can come to the headquarters for a visit.
Because you [can,  
You make it sound easy.

Customer: [You make it sound easy.

Salesperson: It really is easy. It's such a short distance, what's so hard about it?

Customer: How many products do you have in there?

Salesperson: We have 6 major series, with over 100 individual products.

Customer: What are the 6 major series?

Salesperson: Stinky tofu series, snacks series, main dishes series, drinks series, we have them all.

From line 86 to 91, the salesperson is trying to convince a potential customer to visit the company headquarters since the desired product is not available in Fuzhou. The salesperson emphasizes the simplicity and convenience of visiting the headquarters. However, the customer exhibits resistance through a stalling technique. In line 92, the customer then shifts the conversation by inquiring, “How many products do you have in there?” This question serves as a stalling tactic, diverting the focus from the suggested visit to the specifics of the product range. By asking for detailed information about the products, the customer delays the progression of the sales interaction without outright rejecting the salesperson's proposal.

For sequence management, the customer’s inquiry disrupts the sequential flow of the salesperson’s pitch. Instead of continuing to persuade the customer about the visit, the salesperson must now address the new inquiry about product details. For the whole sale, this step allows the customer to manage the pace of the conversation and avoid committing to the salesperson's suggestion.

For salespeople, identifying these signals allows them to address the underlying concerns without losing momentum in the sales process. Meanwhile, recognizing and managing such tactics can enhance their ability to maintain control of the sales interaction and improve their chances of success.

4.2.2 Deferral of Commitment

Customer: Oh, so you don't have any plans right now,

Salesperson: When do you think you would consider starting if the project is suitable?

Customer: Well, I need to see if it's feasible for me to implement:::

Salesperson: You introduce your stuff first::;

Customer: I want to understand, what do you think are your advantages?

Salesperson: What are the advantages of your product?

Customer: Um, what are the main features?

Salesperson: The features are very simple, our product,

because currently, the market is mostly traditional >Changsha stinky tofu<,

but durian stinky tofu,

you should know it's not very common in your area,

and nationwide, we are the only ones doing it.

Customer: Hmm, right, I’m here to listen to your introduction.

In this exchange, a salesperson is trying to gauge the customer’s interest in starting a project and provides an opportunity to discuss the advantages and features of the product, which is durian stinky tofu. The customer, however, employs a stalling tactic to delay the progress of the sales conversation without directly rejecting the proposal.

For sales training, this exchange can be used to illustrate the importance of identifying and managing stalling tactics. By deferring commitment and requesting more information, the customer effectively delays the sales process without outright rejecting the proposal.

Accordingly, sales training can incorporate
strategies to handle such stalling tactics, such as summarizing key points quickly and steering the conversation back to commitment-related questions. For instance, after addressing the customer’s questions, the salesperson might reinforce the suitability and benefits of starting the project soon.

4.2.3 Challenge

In this exchange, the salesperson is attempting to differentiate their product—durian stinky tofu—from the traditional Changsha stinky tofu, in an effort to convince the customer of its unique market value. From line 01 to 24, the salesperson then attempts to highlight the lack of competitiveness in traditional stinky tofu and the unique selling points of their durian stinky tofu. While in line 25 and 26, the customer expresses skepticism and unfamiliarity with durian stinky tofu, which introduces doubt and delays the progression of the sale.

Specifically, by saying, “it’s all the same,” the customer minimizes the differences highlighted by the salesperson, suggesting that the new product does not offer significant advantages over traditional options. This undermines the salesperson’s differentiation strategy. The customer’s unfamiliarity with durian stinky tofu introduces an information gap that the salesperson must now address. This shifts the focus back to educating the customer rather than closing the sale, effectively delaying the sales process. There is no doubt that this tactic buys the customer more time to consider the proposal without making an immediate decision.

Facing this situation, the salesman should provide concise yet compelling information to bridge the knowledge gap quickly and steer the conversation back towards closing the sale.

In summary, this section demonstrated how prospects use stalling tactics by changing topic, deferring the commitment and challenging the salesman that either delay the sale or shift it to a different trajectory. This approach (a) slows down the sales process and (b) limits their immediate commitment to the transaction. In the following section, we will review our findings and discuss how they enhance our
understanding of real-life resistance in commercial interactions.

5. Discussion

This article investigated the communicative patterns through which resistance occurs in real-life “cold” sales calls, leading to the salesperson’s failure to achieve the primary step of a successful commercial transaction. Our goal was to “respecify” resistance by regarding it as a dynamic interactional concern where the stakes are real for both potential customers and salespersons, rather than through experiments or subjective supposition where participants are merely research targets. In this way, we present the theoretical and practical significance of exploring social interactions “as they happen” (Boden, 1994, p. 46).

This research identifies two primary patterns of resistance: blocks, which terminate both the ongoing sequence and potentially the entire sales process, and stalls, which decelerate the progress of the sale. Blocks have several distinctive features: (a) they occupy the second position within adjacency pairs, (b) they involve dispreferred responses that misalign with the action initiated by the previous turn, (c) this misalignment is primarily, but not exclusively, accomplished through accounts that focus on future commercial transactions rather than the current action, (d) prospects interrupt the ongoing course of action by claiming that the anticipated transaction is either untimely or unnecessary for their business, (e) they view the initiating action as a precursor to a potential sale, and (f) they render the preclosure of the call relevant.

Different from blocks, stalls do not terminate the sale but rather to delay or divert its progress. Stalls are typically respond to a salesperson’s attempt to secure the prospect’s permission for the face-to-face meeting. Apart from agreement or refusal, the prospect’s turn decelerates the sale (a) by delaying future arrangement, (b) by taking place of direct communicative methods (like in-person or telephone conversations) with indirect ones (such as WeChat), and (c) framing the transaction as uncertain or dependent on future developments, such as discussions with family. Salespersons often view these responses as dispreferred and, while they may not be refused directly, so they continue their original plans or suggest alternatives that recover the sales process.

The data reveal that prospects utilize extra-sequential resources, such as the context of the “cold” call and its projected outcomes, to resist sales efforts. Based on Raymond and Zimmerman’s (2016) opinions about the influence of social context in the sequential organization, we show how participants combine the projected outcomes with future developments of social occasions as tools to create contingencies. Through blocks, prospects understand and react to salesperson’s prior actions and seek to move toward call termination. By stalls, potential customers evade committing to or refusing a face to face meeting. Instead, they create another trajectory that is far away from the successful commercial transaction.

To demonstrate how blocks and stalls function as conversational patterns in achieving resistance, this research deliberately avoided speculation about the prospects’ inner thoughts, feelings, or motivation. Research findings indicate that resistance is implemented through the orientation to and utilization of sequential and interactional contingencies manifested through real communication. This underscores that resistance is constructed by interactional practices and cannot merely be attributed to cognition or psychology.

There are five empirical evidence that support this argument. First, blocks and stalls are not target at the salespeople’s first pair parts. Conversely, these responses consist of distinguished turn-initial features, for example, acknowledgment tokens, discourse markers, or delay tokens. These turn design characteristics break the action and sequential constraints established by the salesperson’s prior turn. At the same time, these turns project the direction of the prospect’s upcoming response. Second, in addressing to salespeople’s prior turn, prospects regard these as initial actions (e.g., requests, invitations and assessments) that require conditionally relevant SPPs (Schegloff, 2007). This provides us with the sequential organization of resistance adheres to the normality of the real social interactions.

Third, if prospects block the progressivity, they often undertake extra efforts to express their understanding of the salespeople’s initial actions as primary moves toward a final transaction. The inference to this dominant commercial activity acts as a resource for destroying the ongoing sequence. Simultaneously, the
explanation used to close down the action sequence also effectively end the sale. Likewise, stalls serve as counter-proposals or counter-requests that, according to initiating actions, demand an appropriate response from the salespeople. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that, in generating blocks and stalls, potential customers leverage the conversational orderliness of social communication, compelling salesperson to either abandon or modify the sales trajectory.

In conclusion, our research findings not only substantiates theoretical claims about the inherent connection of persuasion and resistance (Knowles & Linn, 2004) but also supply with empirical evidence of how this interplay is managed interactionally.

6. Conclusion

Throughout our research, we have refrained from speculating on the internal cognitive processes of the prospects (Garfinkel, 1963), as our focus is solely on their observable communicative behavior. Our analysis of resistance in talk-in-interaction is bolstered by the transparency, integrity, and verifiability of the methodology employed (Huma & Joyce, 2022). While further investigation into resistance in natural interaction is certainly needed to refine and expand our understanding of resistance as an interactional achievement. This study has demonstrated the theoretical and practical significance of this approach. Additionally, it underscores the necessity of critically examining the real-world applicability of conclusions drawn from studies of resistance that rely exclusively on researcher-generated data in artificial laboratory environments.

References


