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When Margin-Based Pay Meets Joint Quote Discretion: A Theory of Alignment in Inventory-Free Sales Intermediation

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Abstract: Margin-based compensation is expected to align salesperson and firm interests because salespeople earn less when they discount prices or increase acquisition costs. However, this alignment becomes less certain when an inventory-free intermediary gives the same salesperson discretion over the product, vendor, freight arrangement, terms, and customer price. This combination of compensation and joint quote discretion creates opportunities to improve margin through different routes, with potentially different consequences for the firm and customer. To explain these routes, this conceptual article integrates agency theory, performance-measure congruity, sales control, pricing delegation, supplier selection, customer orientation, and misselling research. It distinguishes prechoice perceived compensation opportunity from plan-induced compensation sensitivity, calculated from transaction commissions and a threshold-based pay-period margin bonus. It also separates quote attractiveness from salesperson behavior and uses an exact two-factor allocation to capture interaction between configuration and price once feasible alternatives are known. These distinctions enable the model to separate booked gross profit from horizon-bounded expected economic contribution and expected customer net value. Five propositions predict configuration search, price claiming, consequence shifting, auditable control, and the dual use of configuration capability. Joint discretion permits selection among all three routes, although each route can exist under narrower authority. The mechanism can operate in both business and consumer transactions, with effects varying with expertise, transparency, recurrence, and switching costs. The article develops a bounded theory and research agenda without human participants or proprietary records.

Keywords: Sales Compensation, Pricing Delegation, Inventory-Free Intermediation, Customer Net Value, Agency Theory, Supplier Selection

Introduction

An inventory-free intermediary builds a temporary supply solution rather than allocating stocked goods. One salesperson may select the part, vendor, freight, terms, warranty, and customer price, thereby jointly determining customer benefits, risks, costs, and revenue. Such discretion allows salespeople to respond flexibly to customer needs, but it also means that different choices can produce the same reported margin. Margin-based pay rewards price discipline and direct-cost control, but the effects of delegated authority depend on information, incentives, and controls (Bhardwaj, 2001; Lal, 1986; Weinberg, 1975). Recent evidence similarly points to contingent rather than uniformly beneficial effects (Amaral et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2025), which makes salesperson control over acquisition cost particularly important in inventory-free settings.

Inventory-free intermediation makes acquisition cost partly endogenous to choices about product, vendor, freight, service, and terms. Lower cost may reflect reliable equivalence, but

it may also come with weaker fit, provenance, fulfillment, or warranty protection. Booked margin therefore cannot distinguish value creation from shifted costs and risks. The compensation problem also operates at the portfolio level. Each sale earns commission, while aggregate pay-period margin can determine a bonus applied across the period. A focal quote may therefore change its own commission and, by crossing a threshold, the reward on other sales. This creates two distinct compensation concepts: prechoice perceived opportunity, which arises from the salesperson's assessment of plan rules and threshold position, and plan-induced sensitivity, which is calculated after feasible alternatives are specified. Neither should be conflated with quote attractiveness, which captures expected customer response and operational consequences.

Against this background, the article asks: Under what conditions does perceived compensation opportunity direct salesperson choice toward configuration efficiency, transparent value claiming, or consequence shifting in inventory-free sales intermediation? Configuration and price discretion are distinct rights whose combination permits choice among all three routes, although each route requires only its corresponding authority. Plan sensitivity measures objective reward differences, while booked profit, economic contribution, and customer net value serve as route-specific outcome benchmarks.

The argument therefore extends pricing delegation by treating acquisition cost as partly endogenous, separates threshold-based compensation from quote attractiveness, and distinguishes productive search, visible surplus claiming, and hidden consequence shifting. An exact two-factor allocation accounts for price-configuration interaction, while defined customer and firm benchmarks make route consequences comparable across demand-triggered sourcing firms.

Conceptual Method and Scope

This theory-driven integrative review brings together price authority, sales control, customer advice, and supplier search. The literature search was conducted in September 2026 using Google Scholar, Crossref metadata, and journal platforms, with searches combining pricing discretion, gross-margin compensation, bonus thresholds, supplier selection, total cost, customer orientation, credence attributes, and misselling. Seminal sources were used as starting points for backward and forward citation tracing, while recent reviews helped establish the boundaries of current research (Chefor et al., 2025; Fatima, 2021; Naqvi & Amin, 2021).

English-language peer-reviewed works were retained when they defined a construct, explained a competing mechanism, tested a boundary, or explored tensions between authority, compensation, information, control, and consequences. Studies concerned solely with centralized pricing, inventory replenishment, or compensation arrangements in which salespeople had no meaningful choice were excluded. Older works were retained only when they introduced a focal theory or supplied foundational direct evidence; other supporting sources were limited to publications from 2021 through 2026. The review is intentionally bounded and does not claim to be systematically exhaustive or to estimate an average effect.

The model is intended for scenarios in which a firm carries little or no inventory for a given request and one salesperson controls the item, vendor, freight or delivery terms, and price. Both B2B and B2C transactions can qualify, but expertise, disclosure, recurrence, procedures, and switching costs alter the information available to the customer and the consequences of the salesperson’s choices.

No human participants, proprietary records, or company data are used in the analysis. The study is entirely conceptual and develops propositions for later research rather than making claims about any specific organization or individual.

Theoretical Foundations

Incomplete Measures and Portfolio-Level Incentives

Agency theory links delegated selling to incentives and monitoring because interests diverge, information is private, and observation is costly (Eisenhardt, 1989). Sales control distinguishes between the evaluation of outcomes and the evaluation of salesperson behavior (Anderson & Oliver, 1987), while recent evidence treats control mechanisms as complementary and contextual (Conde & Sumlin, 2025; Fatima, 2021). Local knowledge can therefore justify greater autonomy, but it does not necessarily ensure that salesperson decisions remain aligned with firm interests.

Performance-measure congruity explains why outcome control can fail despite salesperson effort. Incentives direct attention toward measured tasks (Baker, 1992; Holmstrom & Milgrom, 1991), while employees interpret performance pay as either controlling or informational (Kuvaas & Ding, 2025). Different sources of motivation can also affect sales performance in different ways (Good et al., 2022), and specific bonus features can, under some conditions, increase moral disengagement and corner-cutting (Gagné et al., 2025). Because congruity requires measured changes to correspond to principal value (Feltham & Xie, 1994), threshold responses can reveal costly distortions (Larkin, 2014). The model therefore separates prechoice perceptions from plan-induced sensitivity.

For each completed sales j in period T, let BGP_j be booked gross profit, R_j revenue, r_j the applicable base-commission rate, and $c_j = r_j BGP_j$ base commission. Let M_t be aggregate period margin and $b(M_t)$ the step-function bonus applied to total base commission. For a period with positive revenue:

$$c_j = r_j BGP_j,\ M_t = \Sigma_j BGP_j \,/\, \Sigma_j R_j \quad (1)$$

$$C_t = [1 + b(M_t)]\Sigma_j c_j,\ b(m) = \beta_l \text{ for } \tau_l \le m < \tau_{l+1} \quad (2)$$

In Equations 1 and 2, threshold interval ℓ carries rate $\beta\ell$ between ordered cut points $\tau\ell$ and $\tau\ell_{+1}$. A focal quote can therefore change c_j directly, affect both components of M_t, and potentially change the multiplier applied to commission across the entire period. Close probability remains outside the plan rule because it determines whether the contemplated quote becomes a sale. The schedule creates the objective opportunity, while its prechoice perception supplies the behavioral input.

Pricing Delegation and Joint Quote Discretion

Delegated pricing can create value, but its effects depend on the circumstances in which discretion is exercised. Analytical work locates optimal authority in information, objectives, and incentives (Bhardwaj, 2001; Lal, 1986), while landmark and recent evidence shows heterogeneous results across organizational arrangements (Homburg et al., 2012; Amaral et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2025). Discretion is therefore neither inherently aligned nor harmful.

Delegated price authority can affect sales and profit differently, and gross-margin pay does not guarantee higher contribution profit (Dalrymple et al., 1981; Stephenson et al., 1979). The outcomes rewarded by a compensation system may therefore not fully represent the firm's objectives, making configuration authority theoretically important. Pricing research generally focuses on customer-facing price, whereas inventory-free intermediation adds authority over product, source, freight, and terms that determine cost and fulfillment exposure. Configuration and price rights are distinct, but when a salesperson controls both, they can influence both sides of the transaction's margin. Supplier-selection research shows why acquisition price alone is not a sufficient measure of configuration quality. Total-cost approaches consider delivery, quality, technical capability, use, and downstream consequences (Ellram, 1995; Weber et al., 1991), while contemporary supplier choice remains a multicriteria decision (Naqvi & Amin, 2021). Configuration efficiency therefore depends on expected total cost, whereas focusing only on purchase price can encourage salespeople to shift costs or risks elsewhere.

Customer Net Value and Three Margin Routes

Customer orientation balances meeting customer needs with creating legitimate value for the seller. Its seminal formulation directs salespeople toward customer fit (Saxe & Weitz, 1982), while recent research treats salespeople as dual agents who can create value and claim a defensible share of it (Kassemeier et al., 2022; Lawrence et al., 2021). This perspective requires clear distinctions between value creation, allocation, and damage.

Three routes translate customer orientation into distinct margin mechanisms. Configuration efficiency reduces expected delivered cost or improves product fit without reducing customer net value. Transparent value claiming uses visible price or terms to allocate surplus created without concealing material consequences, whereas consequence shifting moves foreseeable costs or risks beyond the current measure or time horizon. The three routes therefore create value, allocate disclosed value, or exploit measurement incompleteness, respectively; booked margin alone cannot identify the underlying behavior.

Misselling research highlights the information conditions that make consequence shifting possible. The seminal agency model shows how commissions can bias advice when an agent promotes an offer and assesses its suitability for a less-informed customer (Inderst & Ottaviani, 2009). Recent field evidence suggests that even additional information about customer needs may facilitate higher prices in credence-goods markets, while reliable seller information can strengthen customer protection (Kerschbamer et al., 2023). In inventory-free settings, salespeople may similarly have greater knowledge of interchangeability, vendor reliability, warranty response, delivery variance, or provenance (Volpers et al., 2024).

Future relationship exposure can discourage consequence shifting, but only when the salesperson expects to bear some of its later effects (Chefor et al., 2025; Lawrence et al., 2021). Account reassignment, discounting, or proximity to a bonus threshold may outweigh more diffuse effects on customer retention. Internalization therefore depends on expected pay, evaluation, account access, or future income, rather than merely whether downstream effects appear in the firm's accounts.

Model Development

Core Constructs and Outcomes

Perceived compensation opportunity is the salesperson's prechoice assessment that improving compensated margin will materially increase pay, based on the plan rules, current pay-period position, and proximity to a bonus threshold. It can direct attention before a specific alternative is found. Plan-induced compensation sensitivity is the objective change in period compensation produced by replacing a prespecified requirement-satisfying reference quote with a feasible alternative, conditional on the same sale realization and other period transactions. Let the quote be (k, p), where k represents configuration and p represents price. Plan sensitivity is calculated from the stated compensation rules once alternatives are specified, rather than from close probability, customer response, or downstream performance. Quote attractiveness separately describes beliefs about these nonplan considerations.

Because configuration and price interact, let H_t hold all other realized period transactions fixed and define $F_{a\beta} = C_t(k_a, p_\beta \mid H_t)$ for $a, b \in \{0, 1\}$. An exact two-factor allocation averages both change sequences:

$$S_k = ½[(F_{10} - F_{00}) + (F_{11} - F_{01})] \quad (3)$$

$$S_p = ½[(F_{01} - F_{00}) + (F_{11} - F_{10})] \quad (4)$$

Equations 3 and 4 allocate the complete plan-induced difference because $S_k + S_p = F_{11} - F_{00}$. Holding H_t fixed prevents other sales from being attributed to the focal quote while preserving its period-bonus effect. This allocation is a post hoc measure, not a claim that the salesperson performs this calculation. Perceived opportunity remains the prechoice behavioral input.

Joint quote discretion defines the decision architecture that permits route choice across both sides of the spread. Configuration discretion covers the product, vendor, freight, and terms, while price discretion covers the final customer-facing price. Each route can arise with only its corresponding authority. Their combination is theoretically distinctive because one salesperson can create a cost advantage and decide whether to pass it to the customer, retain it as margin, combine it with a visible price claim, or conceal a configuration compromise.

The model separates the three outcomes because the same booked result can conceal very different consequences. Booked gross profit is price minus direct costs recognized by the compensation system. Expected economic contribution is the sale-probability-adjusted present value of booked profit, less foreseeable returns, credits, rework, warranty, recovery, and relationship costs over a prespecified horizon τ covering the normal warranty and repurchase cycle. Expected customer net value is expected benefits less price and customer-borne delay, failure, incompatibility, lifecycle, and transaction costs, relative to the customer's best feasible and adequately disclosed alternative, including no purchase. These ex ante definitions make the reference point and time horizon explicit, while Table 1 consolidates them with the model's explanatory constructs.

Table 1. Construct Definitions and Analytical Roles

Construct	Definition	Role
Perceived compensation opportunity	Prechoice assessment of the pay gain available from improving compensated margin, based on plan rules, period position, and threshold proximity.	Causal input
Plan-induced compensation sensitivity	Objective change in pay-period compensation caused by replacing the reference quote with a feasible alternative under the plan rules, holding sale realization and other period transactions constant.	Measure
Quote attractiveness	Salesperson's beliefs about sale probability, effort, customer response, operational feasibility, and noncompensation consequences of a quote.	Choice input
Joint quote discretion	Combined authority over configuration—including product, vendor, freight, and terms—and the final customer price.	Decision rights
Booked gross profit (BGP)	Customer price minus direct costs recognized by the compensation system for the quote.	Measured outcome
Expected economic contribution (EEC)	Sale-probability-adjusted present value of BGP less foreseeable downstream firm costs over a prespecified horizon τ.	Firm outcome
Expected customer net value (CNV)	Expected benefits minus price and customer-borne costs relative to the best feasible, adequately disclosed alternative, including no purchase.	Customer outcome
Configuration efficiency	Evidence-supported configuration that improves EEC without reducing CNV relative to the defined alternative.	Behavior
Transparent value claiming	Visible price or terms used to claim value after material configuration attributes and tradeoffs have been disclosed; EEC and CNV remain empirical outcomes.	Behavior
Consequence shifting	Increase in BGP achieved by shifting a foreseeable cost or risk beyond the current measure or horizon.	Behavior
Salesperson consequence internalization	Extent to which downstream outcomes affect the salesperson's expected pay, evaluation, account access, or future income.	Boundary
Independent technical verifiability	Extent to which material configuration claims can be checked using evidence not controlled by the salesperson.	Boundary
Auditable needs-alignment control	Evaluated documentation of requirements, tradeoffs, sourcing rationale, disclosures, and configuration fit.	Safeguard
Configuration capability	Dual-use knowledge and access that can support verified fit or sophisticated consequence shifting.	Capability

Note. *Definitions developed by the author*

Three boundary constructs help explain why the same plan and authority can produce different choices. Salesperson consequence internalization captures whether downstream results affect expected pay, evaluation, account access, internal reputation, or future income, rather than simply appearing in the firm's accounts. Configuration capability supplies dual-use technical judgment that can support verified fit or sophisticated concealment. Independent technical verifiability determines whether managers or customers can test material claims using evidence not controlled by the salesperson. The model therefore treats route selection as a behavioral response to perceived compensation opportunity, quote attractiveness, available authority, and these information conditions, as shown in Figure 1.

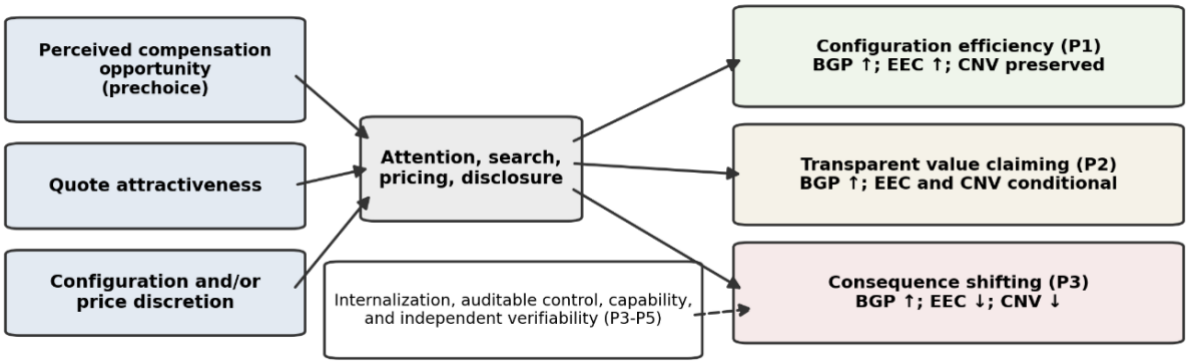

Figure 1. Quote-Level Alignment Model

Source: Author's original contribution

Configuration Efficiency

Configuration efficiency requires evidence-supported fit with an identified customer need. Credible evidence must address function, quality, timing, provenance, warranty, and reliability, even when brands differ. Search is feasible only when expected benefits exceed the costs of comparison, verification, and coordination. Under these conditions, a capable salesperson can reduce delivered cost through vendor and freight choices while preserving customer net value.

Perceived compensation opportunity directs attention toward actions that could increase compensated margin, while configuration discretion provides the means to search. Once alternatives are known, configuration-specific plan sensitivity measures their objective compensation differences. The salesperson then chooses among them based on quote attractiveness, including effort, likelihood of sale, feasibility, and anticipated consequences. Capability and verifiability determine whether additional search is likely to uncover genuine total-cost improvements or merely cheaper inputs. This supports Proposition 1 without reversing the causal order.

> **Proposition 1.** When salespeople possess configuration discretion and perceive economically meaningful variation among potential sources or configurations, greater perceived compensation opportunity increases the probability and intensity of configuration search. When configuration capability and independent technical verifiability are high, that additional search is more likely to increase expected economic contribution without reducing expected customer net value than when either condition is low.

Transparent Value Claiming

Price discretion creates a route distinct from both efficiency and consequence shifting. A salesperson may claim created surplus through a visible price, service fee, or explicit term. When customers can compare that price with stated benefits and available alternatives, the resulting allocation is more clearly disclosed rather than based on hidden degradation. When

the customer knowingly trades price for availability, speed, risk reduction, or convenience, the action reallocates value rather than concealing a loss.

Transparent value claiming depends on evaluability rather than price visibility alone. Recent research shows that customer value creation and defensible seller claims require a balance between the two (Kassemeier et al., 2022; Lawrence et al., 2021). Perceived compensation opportunity focuses attention on higher prices or seller-favorable terms, while quote attractiveness incorporates the risk that the customer will reject them. Disclosure and a usable comparison option can establish a transparent claim, but neither guarantees that the customer's expected net value will remain unchanged or positive.

> **Proposition 2.** When salespeople possess price discretion, greater perceived compensation opportunity from price improvement increases the probability of a higher price or more seller-favorable visible terms. This response is more likely to constitute transparent value claiming rather than opaque extraction when material attributes and tradeoffs are disclosed and the customer can evaluate a feasible comparison option; its effect on expected economic contribution remains contingent on the resulting change in close probability and service obligations.

Consequence Shifting

Consequence shifting moves a foreseeable burden outside the rewarded measure or time horizon. Examples include added incompatibility risk, unreliable sourcing, transferred freight-delay risk, or an undisclosed weak warranty. A poor outcome alone is not sufficient evidence because even an appropriate configuration can fail by chance. The mechanism therefore requires a salesperson to know or reasonably foresee a material difference that the customer cannot evaluate or has not been told about.

An information advantage can enable consequence shifting, while low verifiability and low consequence internalization make it more attractive relative to legitimate search. Returns, credits, warranty claims, defection, and reputational loss cannot discipline choices when the salesperson does not expect to bear them. A nearby margin threshold increases the compensation advantage of a cheaper configuration, but the route selected also depends on whether legitimate efficiency opportunities remain available. This relative-choice mechanism explains how opportunity translates into behavior without assuming that discretion alone causes harm.

> **Proposition 3.** When salespeople possess configuration discretion, greater perceived compensation opportunity from configuration improvement increases the probability of selecting consequence shifting over legitimate configuration efficiency when salesperson information advantage is high, independent technical verifiability and consequence internalization are low, and verified efficiency opportunities are scarce. Such selections are associated with lower expected customer net value and expected economic contribution than the requirement-satisfying reference configuration.

Auditable Needs Alignment and Configuration Capability

A generic needs-analysis requirement is incomplete because the information it gathers can be used in two ways. Urgency, budget, application, and alternatives can improve fit or facilitate surplus extraction. Auditable needs-alignment control instead requires evaluated evidence of requirements, substitutions, tradeoffs, sourcing rationale, disclosures, and fit. Verification, outcome comparison, feedback, and consequences make the record more credible by aligning how information is used rather than simply rewarding its collection. Closed feedback and upward communication further allow frontline exceptions and realized outcomes to revise the decision process instead of treating documentation as a one-time compliance exercise (Hart, 2025a, 2025c, 2025d). Behavioral controls cannot manufacture technical judgment, and capability is not inherently protective. A capable salesperson can use fit evidence to improve a configuration but may also identify opaque compromises and construct persuasive

justifications for them. Independent technical verifiability determines whether documented reasoning can be tested against specifications, supplier records, warranties, or delivery evidence outside the salesperson's control. The safeguard and the dual-use nature of capability therefore require separate predictions rather than a single complex interaction.

Proposition 4. Auditable needs-alignment control reduces the probability of consequence shifting when material configuration claims are independently verifiable; its constraining effect weakens as independent technical verifiability declines.

Proposition 5. Greater configuration capability increases the probability that configuration search produces efficiency when independent technical verifiability is high, but under the information-advantage and opportunity conditions of Proposition 3, it increases the probability of consequence shifting when verifiability and salesperson consequence internalization are low.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

The model extends the study of margin alignment to settings where one salesperson can influence both sides of the spread. Pricing delegation addresses price authority under bounded assumptions (Bhardwaj, 2001; Weinberg, 1975); joint discretion adds endogenous configuration cost, supplier and logistics risk, and customer suitability. Separating plan sensitivity, quote attractiveness, and behavior prevents compensation from being defined by its predicted outcomes.

These distinctions are reflected in how the model conceptualizes choice and evaluates its consequences. Perceived compensation opportunity directs attention before search, while the period equations capture transaction-level commissions, the all-sales margin denominator, and threshold effects once alternatives are specified. The allocation distributes the complete compensation difference across interacting configuration and price changes without assuming causal additivity. Firm consequences are evaluated over a declared warranty and repurchase horizon, while customer value is assessed against the best feasible, adequately disclosed alternative.

Boundaries Across Business and Consumer Transactions

The mechanism can operate in both business and consumer sales because customer type does not by itself determine the underlying information conditions. Pricing outcomes depend on transaction contingencies (Sharma et al., 2025), and professional buyers may lack evidence that consumers receive through standardized disclosure. Information advantage, urgency, switching costs, observability, verification, competition, and consequence internalization therefore provide more useful guides to application than B2B or B2C labels.

Managerial Implications

Managers should evaluate quote architecture rather than margin alone. Control and total-cost research supports combining outcome and behavior evidence and assessing suppliers through multiple criteria (Anderson & Oliver, 1987; Conde & Sumlin, 2025; Ellram, 1995; Fatima, 2021; Naqvi & Amin, 2021; Weber et al., 1991). Firms should separate booked profit from expected contribution, track post-sale outcomes, make thresholds visible, and assess information asymmetry, reliability, warranty, provenance, delivery variance, and repeat business.

Needs documentation should record substitutions, tradeoffs, sourcing rationale, disclosures, and supporting evidence that can be independently checked. Managers should pair these controls with training in technical, supplier, freight, and value considerations while recognizing capability's dual use. Moreover, reciprocal feedback can accelerate role clarity and proficiency (Hart, 2025b), but autonomy remains defensible only when specifications, supplier records, warranties, or delivery evidence permit independent testing.

Future Research

Future tests should treat booked gross profit as an intermediate measure and estimate contribution and customer value using returns, credits, warranty claims, retention, transaction attributes, and declared comparisons. Simulations can calculate plan sensitivity from commission rules, thresholds, period history, and matched quotes while estimating attractiveness separately. Factorial or Shapley-style allocation can preserve price-configuration interactions across behavioral routes.

Research should measure configuration and price discretion separately before exploring their combination. Distinct measures of perceived opportunity, plan sensitivity, information advantage, verifiability, complexity, internalization, and capability can prevent these constructs from being conflated. Threshold discontinuities may identify behavior if designs account for pipeline timing, selection, and attractiveness; comparisons of verifiable rationale, feedback, and supplier restrictions can test Propositions 4 and 5.

Transparent value claiming requires separate study because visible prices may still exploit weak bargaining power or switching costs. Tests of Proposition 2 should hold configuration constant, vary price sensitivity, and estimate price, disclosure, close probability, and customer consequences separately. Cross-context comparisons should use expertise, recurrence, bargaining power, and switching costs rather than assume a uniform difference between B2B and B2C contexts.

Conclusion

Margin-based pay does not determine alignment by itself. Joint control of product, vendor, freight, terms, and price permits choice among efficiency, transparent value claiming, and consequence shifting. Perceived opportunity precedes search, while plan sensitivity captures commissions, thresholds, and all-sales effects once alternatives are specified. Separating quote attractiveness and outcome benchmarks clarifies what a booked gain actually represents.

The central implication is to govern autonomy rather than eliminate it. Inventory-free intermediation requires local search and judgment, while measures that separate contribution and customer value from booked margin can limit consequence shifting. Auditable reasoning can therefore align customer needs, durable firm performance, and salesperson income within a single quote process.

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