

Value creation, co-creation? Some empirical evidences from the Tunisian after market

Authors:

Tibor MANDJÁK (corresponding author)

EM-Normandie (Normandy Business School) Le Havre and Corvinus University of Budapest
tmandjak@em-normandie.fr

Samy BELAID

EM-Normandie (Normandy Business School) Le Havre
sbelaid@em-normandie.fr

Abstract

Value and value creation in an interactive context is one of the core topics of IMP research (e.g. Corsaro 2013, Viio and Grönroos 2013, Håkansson et al. 2004, Ford et al. 2011). Value co-creation is an emerging issue (Cova and Salle 2008) what also became the object of a special issue of Marketing Theory in 2011. However there are only few publications presenting the different value perceptions in a large distribution network of a Mediterranean country.

The paper deals with the Tunisian automobile parts after-market discovering and analysing the different local actors (agents, wholesalers, retailers, and third actors) perceived values.

The Tunisian automobile parts aftermarket is characterised in a hand by very hard competitive context based exclusively on the price and sales conditions. On the other hand there are close historic personal relationships among the local agents and the traditional Western producers (French, Italian and German). However the latter don't have certainly a deep knowledge about the large distribution network.

Perceived value is studied at product, relationship and network levels and always in both sides supplier and customer. Economic and non-economics constituents of relationships value (Durrieu and Mandjak 2000) revealed. Based on the actors' different perceived values two questions analysed: what are the possibilities of value co-creation in the Tunisian distribution network and what are the consequences for the Western producers?

Introduction

Mediterranean countries' automobile parts aftermarkets are typically considered by European producers as a neighbouring market where marketing channels are highly influenced by agents and local distributors generally wholesalers. Export is the usually market entry mode. Producers' decision-makers commonly apply the pragmatic rule of market entry, it means to use "a workable entry mode for each foreign market" (Hollensen 2011:320) with a low-risk. This paper looks in a different way at one of the Mediterranean automobile parts aftermarkets which is the Tunisian one. Further the classical approach it tries to discover and to understand a deeper and more complex context of this market.

Business network model explains the connections among different entities. These "entities are *actors* involved in economic *activities* to convert *resources* to finished goods and services for consumption by end users" (italics in original Johnston et al 1999:266). The connections which tie the actors, the activities and the resources are the business relationships. As describes by the Interaction Model (Håkansson 1982) business relationships are interactive exchange relations between two organisations. They are always composed by economic (exchange episodes, adaptations, institutionalisation) and social (power, dependence, cooperation, closeness, expectations) elements, later named as atmosphere in the original model. This interactive exchange is always embedded in its environment (Håkansson 1982) and connected to many other relationships (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). Furthermore a business relationship is a process where two organisations form strong and extensive social, economic, service and technical ties over time, with the intent of lowering total costs and/or increasing value, thereby achieving mutual benefit (Anderson and Narus 1991). Moreover this interactive business relationship is always embedded in its network (Anderson et al 1994) and it is where the value creation by and the value sharing between the partners are coming true (Anderson 1995). Thus the paper attempts to discover a broader value creation process in the Tunisian automobile parts aftermarket. This broader view means the intent to follow the value creation process of the different actors' relationships across the whole Tunisian marketing channel from the European manufacturer till the local end customer. Based on the actors' different perceived values two questions analysed: what are the possibilities of value co-creation in the Tunisian distribution network and what are their consequences for the Western producers?

The interesting issue in this case is to see how an international network (European manufacturer and Tunisian agent and importer) is embedded in a greater local network (Tunisian wholesalers, part retailers and end-user customers). How the economic and social value generated by the same product is formulated in the different exchange contexts, how is it similar or different?

The paper is structured as follows. A comprehensive part deals with the question of the value creation in an interactive context firstly. It is followed by a short research design. In the third piece some characteristics of the Tunisian automobile parts aftermarket are presented. After discussing some research results the paper ends with conclusions and remarks about limitations and future research possibilities.

Value creation in an interactive context

Value and value creation in an interactive context is one of the core topics of IMP research (e.g. Corsaro 2013, Viio and Grönroos 2013, Håkansson et al. 2004, Ford et al. 2011). Value co-creation is an emerging issue (Cova and Salle 2008) what also became the object of a special issue of *Marketing Theory* in 2011.

Value is an elusive concept (Woodall 2003 cited by Grönroos 2011). There are many important contributions and some different approaches in the large value literature (see summary e.g. Brennan 2009, Lindgreen and Wynstra 2005). This section has a goal only to assign in which sense the value and related concepts are applied in this paper and throughout the empirical research.

Brennan (2009) takes as axiomatic the consensus that customer value can be conceptualised as a trade-off between the customer's perceived benefits and perceived sacrifices. Following Grönroos (1997) more general definition in this paper value is considered as the trade-off between perceived benefits and perceived sacrifices. To be applied this general value definition it must be operationalised. For that three questions could be answered. There is a value of what, to whom, and in which context? Clarifying the subject (what) the object (who) and the situation (context) of the value helps to determine the different elements of the benefits and sacrifices between which the trade-off occurs.

In business typically that is the product what the object of the value is. More precisely the goods: products, services, and projects (Michel et al. 2003) or in a broader sense the offering (Ford et al. 2011) are considered as the value carrier. Nevertheless in business markets not only the offering but the business relationship itself also could be the object of the value (e.g. Corsaro 2013, Håkansson et al. 2009, Durrieu and Mandják 2000, Mandják and Simon 2004, Wilson and Jantrania 1996). However the value is not an inherent characteristic of goods or relationships but it is always perceived by someone, by an actor. "Already in his study of 1730, Bernoulli wrote that value is not an inner attribute of things, but [value] is determined by the relationship between the evaluating person and the evaluated thing" (Bekker 2000:302). In the business the actors are the buyers and the sellers. This value also can be perceived by the customer (the buyer) and by the supplier (the vendor). Anyway the perceptions of the same object of value are different for the two actors involved in the business. Customer value is largely discussed in the literature but there are fewer discussions about supplier value (Walter et al. 2001).

Customer value related to goods or offerings (as object of the value) "is the worth in monetary terms of the economic, technical, service and social benefits a customer firm receives in exchange for the price it pays for a market offering" (Anderson et al. 2009:6). The perceived benefits are some combination of attributes (physical, technical, service) in relation to the particular use, the purchase price and other indicators of perceived quality. The perceived sacrifice contains all the costs the buyer faces when making a purchase (e.g. purchase price, acquisition costs, transportation, installation, order handling, repairs and maintenance, risk of failure or poor performance) (Ravald and Grönroos 1996). From the supplier's point of view the value of the goods of offering is composed by the profit, the volume, and the safeguard

functions (Walter et al. 2001). The safeguard function improves the cost-efficiency of the supplier.

The value of the business relationship itself is perceived once again in a different way by the buyer and the seller. For the buyer the main elements of the business relationship's value are the smoothness of the relationship, the supplier's network position, the buying expectations, the satisfaction with the financial conditions and the duration of the relationship. These elements create the customer relationship value. From the point of view of the seller the business relationship's value is composed by the smoothness of the relationship, the buyer's network position, assumed support from the partner and the sales expectations. These elements create the supplier (vendor) relationship value (Mandják et al. 2012).

In the business the context in which the value is perceived is the interactive exchange. "Interaction between inter-dependent companies involves simultaneous elements of cooperation, conflict, integration and separation in the companies' relationships" (Ford et al. 2002:2). This interactive nature of the business is what fundamentally influences the management of business relationships and consequently the value creation process. Ford et al (2002) define this management as the ensemble of three mutually interdependent elements as network pictures, networking and network outcomes. Network pictures are the views of the network held by participants in that network. Networking means all of the interactions of a company or individual in the network and Network outcomes are the results of different networking (Ford et al. 2002).

The value creation process is also object of discussions in the literature. There are clashing opinions that who is creating the value the supplier the customer or both (Cova and Salle 2008). However "the reciprocal value creation is the basis of all business" (Grönroos 2011:292) is the essential. While for the customer and the supplier there are different meaning and particular activities to create value. In a purely economic sense it is commonly said that the customer is interested by the value-in-use and the supplier by the exchange value. Nevertheless taking consideration the interactive nature of the business relationships between the supplier and the customer a broader definition proposed by Grönroos (2011) is more convenient. The value creation process means that the "value created by the customer, through the support of a supplier, enables the supplier to gain financial value in return" (Grönroos 2011:292).

From the point of view of the value creation process some characteristics of the networking are interesting. Namely networking is always based on restricted freedom and on incomplete knowledge of the complexity of the whole network. Wholesalers, retailers or manufacturers from a network point of view they are all "middle-men" in networking. "Each will build their activities on those of others and produce an output that will be used by someone else. Position and experience are central factors in networking" (Ford et al. 2002:8).

To synthesise this short theoretical section in the paper and throughout the realised study the value creation process is considered as an interactive mutually influenceable and influenced by both the supplier and the customer. In this reciprocal value creation process the value is a

trade-off of the perceived benefits and perceived sacrifices related to the same product and the same business relationship but from two different points of view.

The next section presents how this theoretical starting point has been transformed to a particular research design.

Short research design

The paper deals with the Tunisian automobile parts after-market discovering and analysing the different local actors (agents, wholesalers, retailers, and other actors) perceived values.

Perceived value is studied at product, relationship and network levels and always in both sides supplier and customer. Economic and non-economics constituents of relationships value (Durrieu and Mandjak 2000) revealed. Based on the actors' different perceived values two questions are to study. What are the possibilities of value co-creation in the Tunisian distribution network? From the point of view of the Western producers what are the consequences of these possibilities?

To meet the objective of the research, we conducted a qualitative study in the area of automobile spare parts distribution network in Tunisia. This exploratory phase seems to be relevant in view of our research questions and identifies the scarcity of work in this field of research. In addition to entering the opportunity to benefit from privileged access to field, our choice is motivated by the often recognized highly complex nature of the automotive "after-market" sector, not to mention the prominence that this industry occupies a share of GDP of European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia) and elsewhere in the household budget (Hendaoui 2004, Morisse 2004). More specifically we plan to identify the vectors may contribute to the co-creation of value between the European producer and its network of international distribution.

To achieve our research goal two complementary data collection methods have been used professional interviews and participative observation (Evrard et al. 1997). In this context we conducted a series of interviews with key actors in the distribution network wholesalers-importers (10 managers or general directors) and retailers (8 managers) Participative observation has been executed as we accompanied the export manager and its agent of an Italian producer of bellows CV joint boots, steering gaiters, shock absorbers protection. We attended all the meetings and it was also possible to interview distributors.

The main wholesalers-importers of the Tunisian market were interviewed. In this context, we varied geographies (Tunis, Sousse and Sfax) to ensure a degree of heterogeneity in terms of the profile of catchment areas served. Semi -structured interviews, lasting between 50 min and 90 min were conducted. The applied interview guide is structured as the follows: introduction, analysis of the overall situation, customer expectations of a brand of spare parts, the strengths and weaknesses of reference marks, the comparison between the best brands and the object of study brand.

Data analysis was conducted by manual thematic content analysis to study the transcripts collected from wholesalers-importers and retailers. The intended purpose of this content analysis is to achieve a gradual condensation of the data collected. Phase encoding data: cutting the content of theme interviews and their categorization exhaustive and exclusive homogeneous classes. Some categories have been defined before coding and others have emerged during the coding process (Roussel and Vacheux, 2005). After transcribing the full data set of interviews and made the summary sheets of the interviews (Miles and Huberman 2003) we analyzed (Spiggle 1994) them. Based on this analysis the following section presents the structure and some characteristics of the Tunisian automobile spare parts market.

Some characteristics of the Tunisian automobile parts aftermarket

The market for distribution of spare parts for automobiles is almost dominated by European manufacturers. It is primarily incumbent suppliers, given the composition of the Tunisian vehicle fleet. With agreements between Tunisia and the European Union they enjoy preferential clauses that in the lack of customs duties on imports. Despite this privileged presence, in the last few years the presence of Chinese, Turkish, Brazilian, Indian suppliers became important even whose products are subject to tariffs, but which nevertheless are decline. This creates a competitive environment based almost exclusively on price and market conditions (payment and payment period), in addition to the payment of an annual premium of referencing required by importers wholesalers. On the other hand there are close historic personal relationships among the local agents and the traditional Western producers (French, Italian and German). However the latter don't have certainly a deep knowledge about the large distribution network.

Based on discourse analysis and elements of the participative observation we present the archetypal actors of the Tunisian vehicle spare parts distribution network and summarise the different relationships between and among them. From the point of view of a European producer, in our case an Italian bellows gimbals manufacturer generally two actors are important and mean the real business relationships the agent and the wholesaler-importer.

The **wholesalers-importers** have experience, comprehensive knowledge of the international market ahead of European suppliers, and even Turkey and Asia (China and India). In addition to the important role they play in the purchasing of downstream products market. They are permanent relationship with the agents of European suppliers, in addition to regular visits to major trade fairs (Automechanika, Equip'Auto, etc.). They are also in constant contact with their network of resellers. It means real relay market knowledge.

They have the professional, administrative, physical and financial *capabilities* to import and to handle different spare parts. Their structure, organisation and knowledge of stock management make them able to buy a considerable volume of products. They have a developed internal information system (ERP/CRM).

Based on their previous *relational investments* they have strong network position in the local distributor's system and well established relationships with agents.

They have *business relationships* with foreign suppliers, typically via an agent. The business relationships with local distributors generally managed by the sales manager and the specialized sales force. Sales managers who have experience selling over the counter, relationships with professional automotive repair companies with strong potential purchase. Generally, they have a great ability to influence purchases from distributors. They may have influence over the counter sales staff who may have been at one time one of their employees. These people create the interface between importers and retailers.

The **agents** have double role. They bridge over the cultural, sociological and in a certain way the geographical distances (Ford 1980) between the foreign producer and the wholesalers-importers. Nevertheless their most important role is to be a confidential partner of both parties.

The agents have strong market intelligence *capability* and they have strong knowledge about the products their international and national issues. They have deep legal and technical knowledge of the import process and very developed negotiation skills.

The agents continuously make important *relational investments* both in international and in national level. Their reputation is one of the most important forces.

The agent has *business relationships* with the foreign suppliers but also with the wholesalers-importers. Mutual trust is the fundamental element of the relationship with the supplier. This trust grows up in time and based on interactions, experiences and the network position of the agent.

A good agent established two levels of relationship with the wholesaler - importer. A first level with its management: initiation links by means of an exploratory visit is materialized by a concrete offer (catalog, samples). Negotiations are initiated after studying the trade conditions (price, payment terms and delivery conditions) with a foreign supplier. The agent must have the ability to gather information by reporting the expected price, the prices of competitors. At least two elements determine obtaining this kind of information: confidence, interest (product quality and rear margins hoped) that carries the importer of the product supplier. An advisory role is often enjoyed as it consolidates trust. The relationship is not only based on economic interest. Moreover, the agent must show availability, the number of visits and the length of each visit. In case of conflict, the agent conducts its survey of the importer and trying to find friendly solutions. It replaces the supplier, without commitment.

A second level of relationship is with the wholesale-importer's sales manager who has expertise in demand, usually a specialist by brand car. It is this category of staff who guides the placement of orders. At the same time, they are the preferred partner resellers. They enjoy the recognition of their peers and therefore their ability to influence purchases retailers.

The **local distributors'** (retailers') distributors' network plays the role of suppliers of spare parts to end customers and professional automotive repair shops. They specialize by type of

vehicles (cars and vans vs. trucks and buses) and brand (French, German, Italian, Asian, and Swedish). They provide almost exclusively to the wholesale importers and / or local producers (car batteries, shock-absorbers, filters, brake pads). Given the strong competition between suppliers in the retail market, they are able to negotiate distribution margins from 15% to 18% discounts and payment terms up to 180 days.

They have generally good *capabilities* to collect local market information (prices, competitors, promotions, newcomers). They have very strong knowledge of products and all associated references. Local distributors are strong in advice on application for the end customers. They know how to establish commands.

Local distributors make *relational investments* in two directions. Owners of retail outlets are connected with the commercial direction of the importer. In this case, the relationship revolves around the ordering, trading margins, payment deadlines and profit margins based on the volume of sales. Their selling staff has very close contact with repair shop people, with technicians and sometimes with mechanics.

They have *business relationships* with wholesalers-importers and with repair professionals. In the first they are the buyer and sellers in the later relationships.

The **repair professionals** are typically the end customers of the vehicle spare parts. They physically use the products. Spare parts take part of their business which is the repair service either for individuals (B2C) or for organisations (B2B). They take care of the repair for the end customer and for companies that are not equipped repair shop. The mechanics are specialized by category and vehicle brands and in some cases by the country of origin of a brand origin: French car, German cars. Repair shop companies are managed by a crew chief and they have at their disposal a person responsible for the purchase of spare parts on the local market. They refer to their experience in the use of brands; the profile and visibility of the brand and the country of origin are the key criterion of their spare parts choice. This category of professional develops a resistance to change, given their low level of education (sometimes illiterate), they have learned on the job by imitation, repetition and experience. The lack of professional training prevents integrate new way of doing things, even if they are professionally (scientifically) proven.

The repair professionals' main *capability* is their technical skills. They know very well how to repair those vehicles which are the same brand that they are specialized. They have generally good ability to negotiate and to communicate with the end consumers (B2C).

Repair professionals make *relational investments* mainly with his local distributor. The trust that is established between the retailer and the mechanic used to introduce new brands, provided that the level of quality expected is respected. The retailers pay attention to the quality of products offered, as the rapid flow of information (or rumor) often through informal ways. In this case the repair professionals play a very important role to influence.

Repair professionals generally have strong *business relationship* typically one local distributor. They purchase at this retailer heavily insisting on the price and the instant

disposability of the products. Local distributors typically give different incentives to mechanics (usually it is the owner) and those responsible for the purchase of spare parts for the workshops of large companies. There are the two ways of influence it is either through a professional who has an ascending and / or a relationship with a retailer who are motivated by trust and sharing.

The next section presents some elements of the value of the same product (the bellows gimbals) perceived by the different actors of the Tunisian distribution network.

Some empirical evidences from the Tunisian after market about the value

The largest *wholesalers- importers* (in terms of sales and network coverage local distributors, organization, and seniority) require sufficiently attractive prices to encourage final consumers to try the brand new (all other things being similar, the brand must have a level equal to the reference marks quality). For Mr. SA "I guess for a bellows CV joint boots, a price differential of at least 20% overcomes the barriers of ignorance of the brand, coupled with the image of "Made-in Italy", less vigorous than that of Germany." The price is not considered as an isolated variable. It is associated with the perceived quality of the brand's products compared to European manufacturers of reference, the reputation, the image of the country.

Discourse analysis also highlights a request for enriched products, particularly for kits bellows. In this regard, Mr. SA said, "I was expecting an action on your part to increase sales on the market. We never really worked kits; it has always worked the bellows in bulk. Especially the most from your competitors, they usually do it, in kit form." Indeed, the demand for enriched product is already given by the leading brands on the market. To create competition and bring to market a package with the same quality but at a lower price: propose new solutions already offered by reputed brands are leaders in their field are better accepted.

Mr. MS argues the package, saying that "I think a convenience point of view, the kit is easier to sell, store and present on store shelves." He added that "even our mechanics prefer kits bellows with grease, with what it takes ..." Distributors require a coherent whole (the core product: bellows and the right accessories) that meets the ease of use value.

Although this demand is beginning to emerge, it is not yet the trend, since Mr. IK says that "kits are a solution for some brands of high-end cars, but this is not the case for older cars why car owners looking to spend as little as possible. In addition, the mentality of the Tunisian is not yet ready for these products work well in Europe. It takes time and hard work." It seems that the generalization of this product is more for a segment of end customers and a category of professionals that repair cars in this segment. There would be a learning cost to local distributors who are not all used to buy and sell the complete package to repair professionals and clients. This requires some education on the point of sale, via posters that demonstrate the various benefits package, plus a convincing speech from the counter staff with professionals, as a thought leader, and with customers.

Local distributors are seeking a level of consistency between the new attributes and enriched product. Data analysis reveals that retailers felt that the quality of the bellows was conducive to integrate accessories and make an enriched product: kit bellows. The analysis shows that the interviewees always refer to the reference brands as GKN, FEBI, Bogé, K-S or others. Content analysis revealed that these brands are considered as trademarks by the interviewed local distributors because they are "deemed known, quality and serious". The functional advantage (physical product performance) of an enriched product is examined in the light of a brand or product reference (Monroe 1990).

The qualitative study reveals that there are two types of local distributors. One who are satisfied with a single product in a package at very low cost, or even in bulk and others are waiting to be benefited by the new enriched product (the kits).

The first type retailers are not sensitive to product enrichment efforts. Rather, they are concerned about the cost and the selling price, given their high price sensitivity. They just make the delivery of core product in bulk, or in the best case in a plastic bag. For them any improvement or enrichment will only affect the price level (Nowlis and Simonson 1996).

The second type of local distributors considers that enriched product is likely to increase the degree of attractiveness of the product. This effect seems to depend on the perceived usefulness, on the degree of perceived ease of use and on the product-related characteristics. Arguably we should qualify the role of enriched product on the degree of attractiveness, emphasizing the role of related core product, the context and the individual characteristics (Brown and Carpenter 2000, Mukherjee and Hoyer 2001).

We notice that the perceived usefulness of adding additional components highlights the ease of use for professional repair. This also facilitated the life of the *final customer* who would buy the product itself. In addition, a considerable time saving. It seems that there is a willingness to make efforts to habituate customers to buy the kits. The concept of perceived usefulness in this case clearly refers to the concept of perceived functional benefit.

Conclusions

In the context of our research about the Tunisian automobile spare parts distribution network each type of actors has its own perception about what is valuable for him. Typically this value perception has at least two different dimensions: the value of the product (bellows CV joint boots Kit) and the value of the relationships in which this product is bought or sold. The product value is understood as the trade off between the perceived benefits and the perceived sacrifices. These perceptions are always by and from the point of view of the particular actor and about the same product. The relationship value is perceived through and by the network position of the involved partner (from whom the bellows gimbals are bought or to whom they are sold).

Business relationship value has its own history and it is always the results of interactions and importantly of the partners' previous investments. Interesting is that capabilities and relational

investments seem to be in different proportion. Agents make mainly relational investments. For the repair professionals capabilities appear more interesting. Similarly the European manufacturers also invest mainly to develop their capabilities. On the other hand in the case of the wholesalers-importers and the local distributors the two types of investments look like more balanced. Consequently value co-creation likes simpler between the two different types of Tunisian distributors. It demands more efforts (and investments) in the business relationships between the European manufacturer and the wholesaler-importer. There is a same situation in the business relationships between the local distributors and the repair professionals.

Limitations and further research

There are two types of limitations of our research. The first is related to the qualitative nature of the study and concern the possibility of the generalisation of the results. Either several Tunisian wholesalers-importers or some local distributor have been interviewed this research could investigate only one part of the spare parts' distributor network. Namely those importers who are directly purchasing from the European suppliers were not asked. The research also does not deal with company's repair workshops buying activity. Second important limitation is rooted in the fact that some interviews are only in the phases of organisation. It paves the way some further research questions as well.

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