

## **Channel Stewardship: orchestrating network relationships in a collaborative way**

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### ABSTRACT

Entering the digital age of economy, companies and academics are claiming for new models to business relationships. Therefore some practitioners (Accenture 2017, Bearing Point 2018) and researchers in network studies have highlighted the concept of Network Orchestration (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013; Nätti, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Johnston, 2014; Perks & al., 2017). For Perks et al (2017), Network Orchestration is the process of assembling and managing an inter-organizational network to achieve a collective goal (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013), in which the role of orchestrator is accepted by the other network members (Müller-Seitz, 2012).

Researchers have mostly focused on orchestration practices. Perks et al. (2017) have namely identified four main orchestration mechanisms to align the network actors around the development of value platform (envisioning, inducing innovativeness, legitimizing and adjusting with network). Similarly Paquin & Howard-Grenville are interested in the actions that orchestrators engage in to build interorganizational networks and consider engagement, connection and co-development as key orchestration practices. Yet few is said about the type of actors who can pretend to be orchestrator. In this paper we investigate whether B2B distributors can be such network orchestrators. We also propose the concept of Channel Stewardship to catch the different characteristics of the orchestration of B2B distribution network.

Through an in-depth case study of the network of distributors of electrical supply in France, we show that intermediaries can be skilled channel stewards, not only in their strategic intentions but also in the expectations of the other actors embedded in the network. Because of their specific role and position in the network, they may appear not as leaders but as the most legitimate to align the marketing perspective and efforts of all the actors of the network around the needs of the end-user. By analysing the network as a playground for strategizing, this paper contributes to the literature on network dynamics, value-creating systems and B2B distribution.

*Keywords:* network dynamics, network orchestration, channel stewardship, value-creating systems, B2B distribution, digitalization

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In a fast moving environment companies need to continuously adapt and survive. Since no business is an island (Håkansson & Snehota, 2006), any change impacting companies will have consequences over their business networks. Thus how business networks evolve is becoming a tremendous issue in business marketing (Abrahamsen et al, 2012; Chakrabarti et al, 2013). Given the twofold nature of networks characterised both by stability and change, business literature considers networks as dynamic structures per se (Anderson et al., 1994; Easton & Araujo, 1994; Halinen, Törnroos & Elo, 2013) whose unit of analysis is the relationship (Håkansson et al, 2009). Investigating network dynamics thus questions how

companies can manage interconnected relationships within their networks and the possibility for firms to strategize in their business networks (Gadde, 2003; Abrahamsen et al., 2016). Influencing others within a network can become at stake and at risk in a business network since domination by a single actor can damage any innovative dynamics within the network (Gadde, 2003, p. 358).

Analysing network dynamics therefore demands to investigate the process of change. Anderson et al. (1998) proposed the concept of role to grasp the processual dimension of network change. In the industrial network perspective role and position are considered as key concepts for the analysis of the dynamics in business relationships (Abrahamsen, Henneberg & Naudé, 2012; Anderson *et al.*, 1998; Johansson & Mattsson, 1992; Nyström *et al.*, 2014). Position is highly socially related: for Gill & Stern, 1969, it is "*the location of a person or a class of persons in a system of social relationships*" (pp. 22-23). In the industrial network perspective, it is "*a description of a company's portfolio of relationships and the rights and obligations that go with it*" (Turnbull et al., 1996, p. 12). For Anderson et al., 1998, a position "*locates the actor in the relationship system relative to other actors*" (p. 170).

Our purpose with this paper is threefold: first we question the possibility for an intermediary to influence its network of relationships to reinvent its position. Second we investigate the concept of Network Orchestration to delineate the type of influence it refers to within a network. Then with the concept of Channel Stewardship, we try to show why and how some organisations at a given time recognize a specific agent as their steward who gives some orientations to the network, and assumes the responsibility of the achievement of common goals. We eventually suggest that 1. Distributors of Electrical Equipment can be relevant network orchestrators 2. Thanks to their specific role-and-position, and their scale, they can align the whole distribution network in some directions which enable all the engaged actors to achieve common goals. The French Electrical Sector is our setting to analyse a distribution network dynamics.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **THE INDUSTRIAL NETWORK PERSPECTIVE ON DISTRIBUTORS' ROLE WITHIN NETWORKS**

Our objective is to capture how distribution networks evolve and enable intermediaries to develop a specific influence within the network. The industrial network approach based on the interaction and ARA models has emphasized a lot the importance of networks in business markets (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). In that perspective, as in the social network theory (Nohria, 1992), a network is '*a structure where a number of nodes are related to each other by specific threads*' (Ford et al. 2003, p.18). A business network is made of specific nodes which are business units – be they manufacturers, intermediaries, consumers, consultants, bankers, legal representatives... In the industrial network approach the focus is set on the relationships between those business units, since those relationships are precisely the threads of the network. Thus the industrial network perspective challenges the classical economic conception of markets in as much as networks and markets are conceived as the outcome of complex and various interactions between companies composing the network.

This conception also explains why the industrial network perspective contradicts the traditional marketing view on distribution channels. When this marketing literature analyses the efficiency and the cost of a distribution channel, it's always from the perspective of manufacturers (Alderson, 1949; Bucklin, 1965; El-Ansary & Stern, 1972; Kotler & Keller, 2014), whereas the industrial network approach highlights the relational dimension of distribution, and adopts a network perspective on distribution. In the industrial network perspective a distributor is conceived as a provider (Gadde & Snehota, 2000) whose role is to

identify customer needs and source solutions. Industrial network theorists thus refute the idea of a ‘channel captain’ finding it obsolete (Ford et al. 2003).

Yet the industrial network perspective recognises the possibility for a powerful actor to influence the network. In the industrial network literature it is referred to as ‘*strategizing*’. Ford et al. 2003, assume that domination within a network is due to the resources actors have: the position and the relationships within the network of some actors can precisely be key resources. In the industrial network perspective power is indeed conceived as the ability to combine appropriate resources with the support of appropriate actors to create key activities. For Abrahamsen et al. 2016, strategizing raises the issue of managing the *complexity* of relational interdependences. Applied to distribution networks, Gadde (2012) calls for more collaboration between the different actors of distribution networks and for the related modification of the role of middlemen towards ‘*a value generating network actor*’. In line with that, Abrahamsen et al. (2016) propose an assumption that contrasts a lot with the traditional perspective on power within a network: ‘*Rather than pursuing ‘victory’ over others based on firm-specific resources, activities or monopoly-like industry positions, “strategic thinking involves a company coping with all of those with which it has important relationships or on which it depends, including its suppliers, customers as well as its competitors”*’(Ford et al. 2001, p.3 in Abrahamsen et al. 2016, p.108)’.

#### **THE NETWORK-AS-PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE ON POSITION WITHIN A NETWORK**

*Coordination* and *collaboration* are important dimensions when analysing a distribution network dynamics. To complete the structural analysis of networks proposed by the industrial network perspective, some authors have proposed the markets-as-practice approach to grasp the processual dimension of networks dynamics (Araujo, 2004; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006, 2007a & b, Chakrabarti et al., 2013). In the market-as-practice or market-shaping perspective, it is through their exchanges with other organizations that companies shape the market and influence others. Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007, recognize three types of practices which all contribute ‘*to constitute the market*’ (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007a, p. 4): exchange practices gathering all activities supporting the exchange of goods and services, normalizing practices which lead to the formation of normative expectations for the different actors of a network, and representational practices, corresponding to the activities that produce images of the markets. In the market-as-practice theory focus is set on how markets are shaped. The influence within the network is echoed in the ‘*enrolment*’, the process by which actors convince others of their interest to join their alliances through the use of normative and representation practices. When they deal with the influence within a network, Kjellberg and Helgesson position it mostly at a micro level, an actor level. The alignment of actors within a network is studied from an actor to another one.

#### **SEEKING COLLABORATION THROUGH NETWORK ORCHESTRATION**

The influence within a network also questions the macro level of network dynamics. To address this we need a broader perspective of the influence within a network. In such a context strategizing for firms more and more means efforts to shape their network in a subtle way. Power relationships have to evolve towards influence in a more ‘*discreet direction of the network*’ (Nätti et al., 2014), which corresponds to Network Orchestration. For Perks et al., 2017, network orchestration is indeed ‘*the process of assembling and managing an inter-organizational network to achieve common goals*’ (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013), in which the role of orchestrator is accepted by the other network members (Müller-Seitz, 2012). Rather than a domination of the network based on the power of a single actor, network orchestration involves sets of practices of influence over the network from its members in a collaborative way (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). In the multiple case studies made by Perks et

al. (2017), those ‘*orchestration practices*’ correspond to an ‘*observable, repeated and routinized single or set of activities of the lead firm to the development of the value platform*’. (Perks et al., 2017, p. 106). ‘Orchestration practices’ are then overarched by ‘*Orchestration Mechanisms*’, which are ‘*assembly of practices that produce an effect on the value platform development, which is not inherent in any one of the practices alone*’ (Perks et al., 2017, p. 106-107). There are some similarities between those three latest articles regarding Network Orchestration within business networks. If the three studies develop in details the different orchestration practices, some indications only are given regarding resources. Resources shared during a network orchestration process can be related to *relations* (number of partners, trust, and reputation), *technology* (applications, telematics, and social media), or *knowledge* (expertise, education of the network members, knowledge platform...).

Yet few is said about the Actors: who can pretend to be an orchestrator? For Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013, the word ‘*orchestrator*’ ‘*does not presume a particular form for the assembling entity*’ (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013, p. 1625). In Nätti et al., 2014, the Actor layer is rather elusive since the authors mainly deal with the ‘*Innovation community*’ or ‘*Network members*’. In Perks et al. (2017), orchestrators are called ‘*lead firms*’ without any further description of the characteristics of these firms: size, type of resources, position... Yet to get the real dynamics of a network, we need an additional concept to capture the levers of network orchestration specific to the most influent firms. Regarding a distribution network, we propose the concept of Channel Stewardship.

#### INTERMEDIARIES AS CHANNEL STEWARDS

Rangan & Bell 2006 have developed the concept of Channel Stewardship. .. Rangan & Bell (2006, p. 10) have defined ‘*Channel Stewardship*’ as ‘*the ability of a given participant in a distribution channel - a steward – to craft a go-to-market strategy that simultaneously addresses customers’ best interests and drives profits for all channel partners*’. For them traditional channel management drives difficulties to adapt to change. This emanates from the opportunistic view on channel strategy that most manufacturing firms have. Many channels develop while sales revenues grow. The shape of the channel is influenced by the personal relationships and preferences of a few firms. When new and strong factors impact the environment of the channel these informal rules are not efficient any longer to bring guidance to the channel and conflicts raise. This lack of guidance explains why Rangan & Bell advocate a change in the channel perspective. Channel Stewardship is not a question of size, nor coercive power: a channel steward can be any actor in the channel value chain for whom addressing the needs of end users is at stake. A steward can be either a small manufacturer or a large one, a small or large distributor, broker, retailer... provided that the steward assumes the responsibility of bringing ‘*a disciplined approach to channel strategy*’ (Rangan & Bell, 2006, p. 12). For this approach to be effective a shift in the perspective around customer’s demand is mandatory. Rangan & Bell indeed consider demand chain as ‘*encompassing the transactions that occur to fulfil the customer’s needs, including and surrounding the product. Thus, all complementary products and services purchased or consumed as part of the transaction become the relevant focal point.*’ (Rangan & Bell, 2006, p. 23). This perspective highlights the blending nature of consumption.

This new perspective on demand explains why intermediaries are good candidates for Channel Stewardship. According to Rangan & Bell, and in line with Gadde & Snehota (2000), intermediaries are the first providers of customers. As such, intermediaries or distributors can take benefit from their position within the channel in as much as they are closer to end-users than manufacturers, and have often a scale and a reach that enable intermediaries to permanently reshape the channel according to the evolution in demand. The concept of Channel Stewardship is thus a dynamics per se and is supposed to be ‘*anchored in*

*the principle of evolutionary change*' (p. 12). According to Rangan & Bell, regarding intermediaries, the *'key lever of stewardship'* is their expertise which comes from their ability to propose the customers a bundled offer of products and services from different suppliers, since the customers' needs mostly exceed the value proposition made by a single manufacturer (p. 163). Rangan sees the portfolio of distributors' suppliers as an *'assortment of alliances'* that favours the realignment of channel capabilities under the stewardship of intermediaries. The capacity to manage this assortment of alliances with a broad perspective on demand change thus gives intermediaries the opportunity to *'constantly guide and direct changes in channel design and management to align in the channel with customer needs while driving profits for all channel partners'* (Rangan & Bell, 2006, p. 12).

For Rangan & Bell 2006, the channel steward must have some specific resources: a scale and a reach which legitimate him to speak for the customers, a network perspective in the marketing strategy, an ability to stimulate the strong commitment from all partners and the permanent will to pay each partner for its contribution to the demand satisfaction, that Rangan & Bell name *'rewards'*. There are many similarities between the concept of Channel Stewardship and the one of Network Orchestration. Both aim at creating a shared view of common interest among the network members. In addition to that, both foster the development of a good level of trust. Both imply a subtle management of members' ties to ensure the holistic value creation process. Somehow we can consider Channel Stewardship as a lever of Network Orchestration: there are indeed orchestration mechanisms and orchestration practices in Channel Stewardship. Yet the focus on the efficiency of the steward enables to deepen the practicalities of the orchestration mechanisms and practices. The emphasis on the required resources explains also why Rangan & Bell regard intermediaries as potential efficient stewards.

Table 2 also shows the collaborative mind-set that a channel steward must have. That doesn't mean that the steward solely relies on the trustworthiness of the channel members: trust doesn't prevent control. But control is not power : according to Rangan & Bell (2006), power should be used in the channel value chain only to fill a gap between channel capabilities and the demand requirements, or to have the channel members remembered that value creation must benefit all parties, not only their personal interest. Otherwise power is considered as *'suboptimal'* (p.114). Indeed the channel stewardship of intermediaries suppliers do have power: there are power games within any channel value chain and intermediaries must reward their partners to maintain a good level of trust and a strong commitment of their partners. But in the Channel Stewardship perspective as in the Network Orchestration one, power dimensions are included in the interactions without giving them a central focus. Both perspectives advocate that power is just a possible dimension of a network but can't characterize the whole network.

## **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

### **CASE DESCRIPTION**

The EE sector counts different actors such as manufacturers, distributors, installers (electricians) but also regulatory institutions, etc. (see Figure 1).

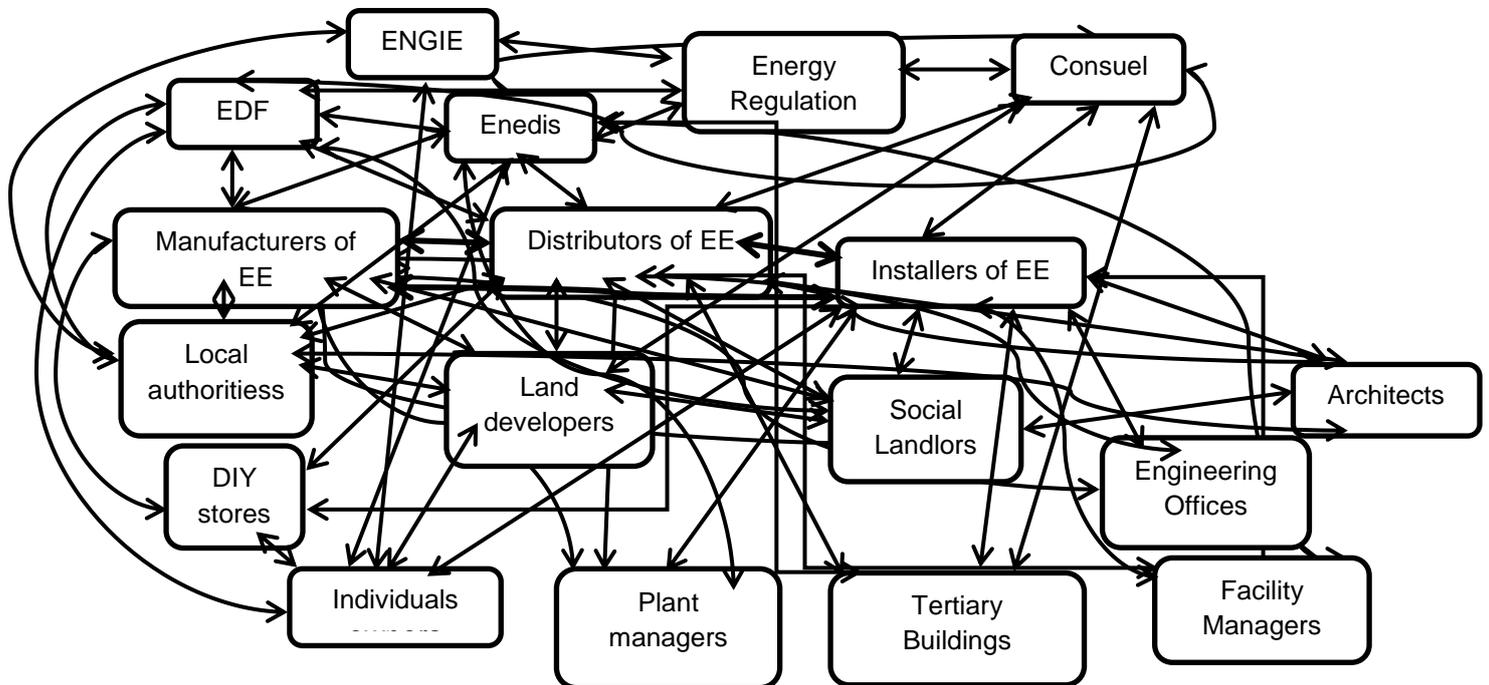
*Manufacturers* of electrical equipment are mostly concerned with the manufacturing of power distribution, distribution transformers, industrial controls, energy management... Most manufacturers are leading players operating in the global electrical equipment industry such as General Electric, Siemens, Schneider Electric, Legrand, Hager, ABB, Philips Lighting, etc. The French market is oligopolistic: Schneider Electric and Legrand dominate it.

The French EE *distribution* market is characterised by an oligopolistic structure. The two leaders represent 75% of the market, whereas the remaining 25% is held by independent distributors. While the leaders rely on a generalist positioning, they tend to become multi-specialists according to the segmentation of their customer portfolio and the change in customer’s demand. The independent distributors try to differentiate with niche markets, where they offer high technical value.

*Installers* (electricians) install and maintain electrical equipment for industrial, commercial and domestic purposes. This activity relates to a very heterogeneous population, since it includes very small companies, less than 10 employees (95% of installers), and very large groups with well over 1000 employees. Installers are specialised according to three segments of construction: industrial / residential / tertiary sector. Small installers work mainly in the residential sector whereas industrial and tertiary sectors are largely dominated by major construction companies.

The French distribution network of electrical supply originates from the strategy of one of the largest manufacturers to postpone their logistics cost. In the early 1960 this large supplier met the key decision maker of one of the most important distributors near Paris city centre, asking him for structuring a distribution network and even investing in the distribution holding firm. Till the mid 1990’s distributors of electrical supply were mostly small firms, with a strong local reputation. From the mid 1990’s the two leaders absorbed a lot of small actors becoming very large groups mostly considered as logistics specialists. Today the rules of the game are evolving since the electrical sector is facing profound change with the energy transition, the digital transition and the entry of the GAFAM in the rivalry. Balance of power between manufacturers, distributors and installers is under reshaping.

**Figure 1: the French Electrical Equipment distribution network**



**CASE ANALYSIS**

**INTERMEDIARIES ARE TRUE NETWORK ORCHESTRATORS**

Most channel literature has analysed the role of distributors from a manufacturer perspective overemphasizing the control and power issues (El Ansary & Stern, 1972; Frazier, 1999, Narus & Anderson, 1984). In that view manufacturing management is perceived as able to shape the distribution channel and control the channel members (Frazier, 1999). This reflects a modernist thinking of the autonomous individual that doesn't take into account the interdependence that characterizes any network of B2B actors (Stacey, 2007). This mechanistic perspective on distribution implicitly denies any agential properties to distributors: distributors are not seen as agents but rather as an '*instrument*' in the marketing strategy of manufacturers (Gadde, 2012). Empirics show the opposite: not only is the status of agent acknowledged to distributors by all actors of the EE sector but distributors clearly take hold of their agency to strategize through their network of relationships: "*For a few year distributors, they don't want to sell cartons any longer, they want to accompany*" (Installer), "*The distributor, what a financial intermediary! The distributor is a banker!*" (Manufacturer), "*Wholesaler - the word itself is a bit disturbing because it is very reductionist, at least regarding the large range of services that we propose today*" (Distributor), "*The role of a distributor is also to coordinate the network of installers*" (Distributor).

The verbatim show the selfhood, the motivation, the purposiveness, the will and the creativity of distributors, all words related to agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p.962). Empirics have shown that distributors occupy a large place when it comes to coordinating. That means that they are indeed legitimate agents. That's precisely what distributors express when they say they don't want to be over dependent on manufacturers: '*I want to develop my prescription without suppliers. I don't want to shack up with one or another*' (Distributor). Distributors expect from suppliers to integrate their capacity and will for action: '*For me partnership is related to the comprehension of distributor's issues and of the differentiation it can make*'. Distributors assert their active creativity and commitment into the clients' projects: '*Triggering ideas, being an actor in the client's project*'.

### INTERMEDIARIES HAVE SPECIFIC RESOURCES

Our study also shows that influence within a network not only depends on scale and position but also on resources, especially on marketing perspective: it's because they are conducting a deep reflection on customer segmentation and the way to align with the customers' behaviours that distributors are likely to become channel stewards. That's why many actors use the word '*revolution*' for the mandatory new value proposition around the demand's needs: '*The coming revolution is commercial*' (Distributor). '*It's like the electrician: his technical installation has to be perfect but that doesn't matter. What matters is the service that he has to propose. That's a cultural disruption*' (Installer). In the comprehension of customer trends two actors are legitimate: installers because they are the closest to customers, distributors because they can build bundled offers and manufacturers for their R&D ability. Yet achieving collective goals through coordination requires resources: installers have limited ones whereas distributors of EE have large ones. '*Lighting, for instance: it's difficult for our installers to follow the pace of innovation. It's difficult to say today that the product we sold 6 months ago is no longer the product to propose*'. (Distributors).

The resources claiming for the stewardship of distributors are first their technical expertise, their physical proximity to professional clients, second, the ability to conceive a segmented offer adapted to the use of each type of professional clients. The different respondents all recognize the specificities of the distributors' resources. '*We are pretty sure that the Internet*

*winner will be the B2B distributors having an omni-channel strategy. They are the ones who can mix on-line and physical presence*'. (Manufacturer)

*'The two main distributors have evolved a lot. They have trained their teams, they have structured their processes. They have created specialized sales team. Now they are able to make their own technical studies whereas they used to rely on manufacturers for that before, and they were bound to prescribe the brand of those manufacturers. Nowadays they don't want to be dependent and they are able to say 'I'm able to manage the project. What is your contribution beyond the product or the technical study? (...) Now we need to provide them with other skills.'* (Manufacturer)

### **INTERMEDIARIES ARE LEGITIMATE ORCHESTRATORS**

But the respondents not only acknowledge the relevance of distributors' resources, they also agree on the ability of distributors of electrical supply to operate actions giving sense to all network members. In the French EE sector the nature of the narratives deployed by all actors is inclusive: coordination and collaboration are the leading words in the interviews. Even if some actors recognise that, because of habits of conflict, this coordination will be tricky to implement, they still claim for more coordination in the network: *'There is a pie and slices for the different actors of the sector. Some tell themselves 'I'll get a bigger slice'. Or we may all consider that it is our interest to have the pie grown for all of us (...) we need to agree on how to have the pie grown otherwise it won't work'* (Installer). In that extent the response to the end-users' needs is set as the common objective by all actors of this network: *'There is a new business trend: the partnership with manufacturers or maybe with distributors, bringing service support in order not to stand alone for a deal. Support can be commercial or technical'* (Installer). The collective commitment is thus a prerequisite in the recipe of common value creation through the network.

The interviews suggest also that distributors are the more likely to coordinate that process of value creation through services: *'I think that all what distributors are currently doing is right – they have a real strategic planning, a deep thinking, they have the resources - they are taking the good orientations. Service providing - that's a good idea'* (Installer). Distributors endorse their steering will when they claim that it's time for the network to think in terms of clients' use and not in terms of product: *'The alpha & omega at the heart of our supplier relationship of tomorrow, the customer and not the product!'* They want to realign the channel around the purchasing behaviour of clients and the reward for the distributors' partners is the fight against new entrants: *'We need to sit around the same table to analyse markets so that we know how to address them together and face the competition of new entrants'*. (Distributor)

### **INTERMEDIARIES ARE POTENTIAL STEWARDS**

That precisely illustrates the fact that there is actually a true potential for a channel stewardship assumed by distributors of electrical equipment. Yet two key ingredients are still missing for this channel stewardship to be performing: trust and information sharing. The EE sector is indeed rather used to adversarial relationships and competitive mind-set rather than to collaborative ones. Although all actors agree on the necessity to collaborate to face Amazon and Google, information sharing is not natural and easy for all types of actors: *'it's maybe also the positioning of large multinationals towards small installers, small workmen, there isn't enough trust from them in their clients to tell themselves 'If I help my client he will*

help me'' (Installer). 'We have been negotiating for a long time now (...). Until recently sales out reporting ... «What are you doing with it? Stealing us business? » They were afraid. Now they do understand that in that business model (...) their interest stands rather in giving us information so that we give them more business' (Manufacturer). Data thus confirm that for distributors to appear as legitimate stewards within their network, they have to emphasize the rewards to increase trust and information sharing.

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