

Communicating competence in the medical diagnostic industry

A customers' view

Work-in-progress Paper

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Abstract

The recent theoretical contribution of Golfetto (2003) has provided an enlightening perspective for an emerging practice in the business-to-business (BtoB) context: the so-called Competence-based-Communication (CBC). This approach suggests that managers should develop communication processes focusing on communicating the set of resources and capabilities that can create an added value for the customer. In order to see whether we could find empirical support for the hypothesis that adopting the CBC approach is worthwhile, we conducted a study to explore these issues from the customer's perspective, by surveying different categories of industrial customers about the types of information and communication tools they find most valuable when evaluating their suppliers' value creation potential. Our first objective was to determine whether the different actors in the pipeline choose suppliers on the basis of their competencies. The most statistically significant finding on this matter was that, during purchasing decisions, all categories of customers consider the supplier's resources and competencies to be more important than the product characteristics themselves. Our second objective was to understand what indicators, signs, and information sources are used to evaluate suppliers' competencies. In this case, "experiential" tools (i.e., ones that allow the customer to test and anticipate a supplier's products and services) turned out to be preferred by customers while evaluating a supplier's potential. Overall, the results of the survey highlight the importance and the value of the CBC approach. Following our discussion of the contributions and limitations of the study, as well as the questions that remain to be answered, we propose a new research agenda for the study of BtoB communication.

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Introduction

Like most areas of marketing, business-to-business (BtoB) communication is undergoing new challenges and evolving through the development of emerging opportunities. In the domain of communication practices, industrial customers in particular must rely more heavily and more intensively on an accurate communication process than other customers since they require much more information about supplier capability and commitment to enhancing value creation for the customers (Möller and Törrönen 2003).

As Golfetto has suggested in a recent theoretical contribution (2003), firms are experimenting with new ways to communicate with their industrial customers, ways that highlight their resources and competencies, especially those able to create an added value for the customers (see also Fiocca 2002; Rinallo and Borghini 2003). This approach, called “*competence-based-communication*” (CBC) is theoretically associated with the view of the supplier as a “*competence provider*” (Golfetto 2003, forthcoming).

This concept of “competence provider” is rooted in the IMP’s view of the customer-supplier relationship (Håkansson 1982; Ford 1990; Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 1994; Håkansson and Snehota 1995), in the service marketing literature (e.g., Grönroos, 1990), and in the Resource Based View (RBV) of the firm (e.g., Barney 1991; Wernerfelt 1995; Grant 1994). Each of these three approaches emphasizes the importance of the customer’s relationship with the supplier in BtoB contexts (a relationship characterized by complexity and customization of products), the supplier’s role as a reservoir of resources and competencies or as a consultant and problem solver.

The CBC approach is primarily based on the following three central findings about effective communication in BtoB practices:

- 1) From the customer’s perspective, CBC can be optimized when it nurtures a pre-purchase experience for the potential buyer. Through such “experiential communication”, the customer

can somehow test and anticipate the supplier's products and services. In this logic, the competence and resources of the supplier represent the foundation on which to build this communication experience. The tools that appear to be most suitable for creating this state are those that allow the development of a direct, personal and interactive exchange.

2) The relative importance of these tools, as well as the way in which they should be used, is context-dependent, varying with the category of product/service involved and with the stage of the pipeline in which the buyer-supplier relationship occurs. The mix of competencies communicated to the customers can cover a continuum of possibilities between the two extreme foci: "*solid*" competence and "*fluid*" competence. The first of these terms denotes tangible products and accessories, while the second refers to services and any other intangible forms of customer support. Golfetto (2003, forthcoming) claims that the CBC approach is more worthwhile when the mix of the competencies communicated to the customers requires adaptation of the products to the customer's needs or a relatively high proportion of fluid competence.

3) The adoption of a CBC approach could involve a substantial investment for the supplier who has to concentrate not only on the creation of the resources and competencies that are relevant *per se*, but also on those which are most significant for the customer. The supplier's communication budget and strategy, as well as the long-range scenario, should also be analyzed and evaluated in this light.

Overview

Notwithstanding the theoretical attractiveness of this approach, many questions are still in search of an answer. For example, how can competence be properly communicated? Which competencies are important for specific customers? Which indicators customers use to evaluate

their suppliers' competencies? Indeed we need to know the answers if we want to understand how CBC permits a supplier to gain a competitive advantage.

In order to see whether we could find empirical support for the hypothesis that adopting the CBC approach is worthwhile, we conducted a study to explore these issues from the customer perspective.

Our first objective was to determine whether the different actors in the pipeline (namely, the producers, the distributors, and the end users) choose suppliers on the basis of their competencies. Our second objective was to understand what indicators, signs, and information sources are used to evaluate suppliers' competencies.

Despite the potential restrictions resulting from our focus on just two highly specialized industries, and the typical limitations of any exploratory survey, the results of this study show that CBC has a high potential value to marketing practice; moreover, the study provides the empirical support needed to inspire further development of CBC theory. It also delivers some important insights on customers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the different communication tools available to suppliers; their perceptions suggest the usefulness of those tools that allow the development of "experiential" pre-purchase communication processes.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next two sections, we describe the research hypothesis, the methodology and results of our study. In the last section, we point out some emerging managerial and research implications.

Research hypothesis

The empirical study was developed through a survey structured so as to test the validity of the following four hypotheses.

- H1: *In evaluating a supplier's value creation potential, the customer will ascribe more importance to its "fluid" competencies than to its "solid" competencies (the products themselves)*

According to the CBC approach (Golfetto 2003), we would expect that in their purchase decision processes, customers would give strong consideration to the resources and the competence of the supplier as the means necessary to provide customized or innovative products and services.²

Even when we take into consideration the context-based nature of these evaluations,³ it is possible to predict a general and pervasive trend towards this behavior.

This means that the customer will want to be aware of the whole set of resources and capabilities available to the supplier for providing products and services. A supplier's "solid competence" (Golfetto 2003), embodied in products and measured by market prices, will thus not be the only perspective adopted by customers in order to evaluate the supplier's potential.

- H2: *Customers will evaluate the relative importance of the solid and fluid competence of their suppliers differently, depending on the proportion of regular vs. occasional suppliers in the customer's supply pattern (or structure)*

The value of the CBC approach can vary according to the nature or role of the suppliers. The simplest way to distinguish them is to identify regular vs. occasional suppliers. According to the assumptions of the CBC approach (Golfetto 2003), we assume that the importance of solid vs.

² This perspective does not deny the prevalent view of the nature of the evaluation process (de Chernatory et al. 2000); it relies on the model of the perceived trade-off between total benefits received and total sacrifices incurred by the customer, where the benefits are represented not only by products or services but also by the supplier value potential embodied in its competence.

³ These evaluations can vary according to two different points of view. First, the perception of benefits and sacrifices can vary between industries, cultures, customers, and stages in the life cycle of the relationship. Second, the competencies required from the supplier can be different from the above-mentioned factors; for this reason, customers can be interested in evaluating resources and capabilities that belong to a wide range of typologies.

fluid competence would be different, depending on the nature of the supply structure of the customers.

- H3: *Different positions held in the pipeline by the customer will lead to different evaluations of the importance of the supplier's resources and capabilities*

In business contexts, customers can belong to a wide range of organizations and industries. Only a few represent the end users of the products; many are distributors, while many others are part of the production pipeline. According to the CBC approach, different position held in the pipeline would lead to different evaluations in the importance of a supplier's solid vs. fluid competencies. For instance, in the more upstream stages of the production chain (as in producer-producer relationships), customers would be more interested in analyzing fluid resources and competence, while at the downstream levels (as in the producer-distributor relationships) attention would be more focused on product features and performance.

- H4: *Customers will find experiential communication tools more useful for the evaluation of suppliers' competencies than non-experiential communication tools*

As a result of further considerations emerging from explorative interviews and literature analysis on the use of communication tools in BtoB contexts, we hypothesize that customers interested in knowing and assessing the supplier's resources and capabilities will privilege those tools that allow a direct and interactive exchange with the supplier's representatives, such as product demonstrations, open houses, trade fairs, exhibitions during conferences and meetings, sales rep visits and so on. These communication tools are suitable for creating an experiential exchange of information. Direct contacts let the sellers reduce the social and the technological distance from the buyers (Ford, 1980) and give the customer the possibility to assess the supplier capabilities with direct questioning and tests.

Research design

The medical diagnostic industry background

For our empirical investigation, we had two reasons for selecting the highly technical industries devoted to the production of diagnosis and electronic medical devices. First, it is a knowledge-intensive industry characterized by complex communication practices that absorb substantial financial resources. Usually suppliers invest in a quite wide range of communication tools, including both indirect and direct tools. They use traditional advertising tools (such as brochures, flyers, websites, portals, and ads in industry-related managerial and scientific journals), participate in trade fairs and scientific conferences, organize open-house events and demonstrations of products in many different sites, sponsor scientific workshops and research projects, and of course focus their main communication resources on the activities of their sales reps. As is true in other contexts, their communication processes can be highly differentiated in order to address different types of audiences, such as distributors, producers, buying centers, or users.

Our second reason for choosing this industry is that its customers (scientists or physicians and, in the intermediate market, the distributors) are usually competent and knowledgeable about product features and performance. They are aware, or can easily become aware, of the consequences of product purchases on their working activities. Physicians and scientists, in fact, can compare competitive products, by evaluating their technical characteristics, analyzing the results of test activities, and/or relying on their own direct experience.

The present study was carried out in three steps. In the first one, semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted in order to (1) understand the specific characteristics of the communication processes developed in this industry and (2) single out the different types of competencies that customers believe a supplier should possess, in order to properly serve them.

In the second step, these results were used to define a draft version of a questionnaire that was then submitted to a first group of respondents for testing. After two rounds of revision, a final version of the questionnaire was submitted to producers, physicians, general managers, and buyers and distributors for hospitals, laboratories, and clinics. In the following sections, we first describe the construct development, and then present the results of the survey.

Construct development

The supplier's competencies which are relevant in the different divisions of this industry are numerous and sometimes very industry-specific. Nevertheless, we grouped them into these four categories:

- (a) *supplier's technological capabilities*, embodied in the features and performance of products;
- (b) *supplier's capability to adapt the product to the customer's needs*;
- (c) *supplier's medical and scientific competence* (knowledge of pathologies/physiologies/research and scientific testing objectives);
- (d) *supplier's capabilities regarding technical assistance and other customer-oriented services*.

We defined these categories by drawing on the CBC perspective and the results of the open-ended interviews.

The related literature analysis developed in BtoB contexts⁴ and our deep open-ended interviews allowed us to define the range of communication tools that we wanted to survey and the nature of information requested by the different categories of customers. We developed this list from

⁴ We relied especially on the contributions made in the following articles: Parasuram 1981; Moriarty and Spekman 1984; Jackson et al. 1987; Bunn and Clopton 1993; Ostilio 1995; Schmitz 1995; Gilliland and Johnston 1997; Sharlang and Balogh, 1996; Brossard 1998; Godar and O'Connor 2001; Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2002; Blythe 2002.

the customer's perspective, considering the tools they consider most suitable for collecting information relevant to evaluating the supplier.

Table 1 represents the range of tools on which the research has been focused, together with a sample set of relevant characteristics, features, and signs used in supplier evaluation.⁵

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Sample and data collection

Data were collected through structured interviews, conducted interactively by the use of a multiple-choice questionnaire. Our choice of a face-to-face interview derived from our need to also collect explanations about the respondents' answers, and most of all, from our need to select only respondents who were potential or actual customers (whether as distributors, actors in the production pipeline, member of buying centers, or users). Each interview could last from fifteen to forty minutes.

A total of 161 valid questionnaires were obtained. Approximately, 49.7% of the respondents were distributors, 32.1% were manufacturers and 18.2% belonged to the research or public health domain which in this industry, as specified above, represent the users or final buyers.

Results and discussion

Analysis of the data collected by the survey was performed through the statistical software SPSS. Our presentation of the results and the findings is structured around the four theoretical research hypothesis.

⁵ The complete set of characteristics, features, and signs investigated during the survey are also available. Please contact the correspondent author.

H1: *In evaluating a supplier's value creation potential, the customer will ascribe more importance to its "fluid" competencies than to its "solid" competencies (the products themselves)*

The findings related to the first hypothesis are reported in Table 2. Data on the mean and s.d. rating are provided for each group and for the sample as a whole.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

These findings strongly support the first hypothesis by affirming the importance of a competence-based evaluation of the supplier's value creation potential by the customers. The means are significantly different; a paired sample t-test (two-tailed) on the difference among the weight ascribed to product performance (solid competence) and the total weight assigned to fluid competencies revealed a $t_{(112)}=-4.2327$ (sig.=0.00 with $p<0.001$) for the whole sample. Highly significant t values were found for all the split data for the distributors ($t_{(52)}=-3.687$, sig.=0.001 with $p<0.01$) and the manufacturers ($t_{(37)}=-2.060$, sig.=0.047 with $p<0.01$). The findings do not statistically support the hypothesis for the third group of people in health care or research organizations ($t_{(21)}=-1.050$, sig.=0.309 with $p<0.01$) even though the mean weight assigned to fluid competence is about 56.7%. However, this particular result could be caused by the relative smaller sample of respondents.

Thus our results suggest that in the medical diagnostic industry, competence-based evaluation seems to be the most powerful approach to the purchasing decision process. This first important finding allows us to recognize that the CBC approach to marketing communication does have value.

H2: *Customers will evaluate the relative importance of the solid and fluid competence of their suppliers differently, depending on the proportion of regular vs, occasional suppliers in the customer's supply pattern (or structure)*

All the groups seem to rely primarily on regular suppliers. More specifically, the mean of the weight of the regular suppliers on the total is about 80.53% for the manufacturers, 78.22% for

the distributors and 48.82% for the health care/research organizations. As Table 3 shows, different types of supply structure lead to different evaluations of the importance of a supplier's solid and fluid competencies.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

When the weight of occasional and especially new suppliers is higher, the importance of evaluating fluid competencies seems to increase. Interest in discovering and analyzing the supplier's resources and competencies appears in fact to be greater with new suppliers or at the beginning of a relation (Golfetto 2003).

Through a regression analysis between the weight of regular suppliers and the importance of solid competencies, it is possible to find a weak ($R^2=0.058$) positive relationship with $Beta=0.204$; of course, the opposite result emerges when analyzing the influence of the regular suppliers on the total weight of the fluid competence ($Beta=-0.204$).

The results are thus somewhat inconclusive in regard to the Hypothesis 2. However, they highlights again the importance of analyzing the influence of the different stages of the customer-supplier relationship on the evaluation process.

H3: Different positions held in the pipeline by the customer will lead to different evaluations of the importance of the supplier's resources and capabilities

For the third hypothesis concerning the influence of the business activity of the respondents on their evaluations, our results show that a competence-based evaluation is actually shared among all the positions in the pipeline. ANOVA with post-hoc contrasts did not permit us to refute the null hypothesis, for all the groups and the sample as a whole. No significant differences were found in the evaluations.

All the findings related to Hypotheses 2 and 3 have potentially useful and interesting implications for managerial practice. They suggest that communicating and demonstrating competence to the customers can be particularly important at the beginning of a relationship and any time it changes in some way. The content and the focus of CBC approach are equally valuable for manufacturers and distributors as for health care and research organizations.

Even though these results reinforce the importance of a CBC approach, they still do not demonstrate directly how a supplier might find more suitable ways to communicate its available resources and capabilities in order to identify an added value for the customer.

The second part of the survey was designed to analyze the usefulness of different communication tools and the importance of some signs and indicators related to them.

H4: Customers will find experiential communication tools more useful for the evaluation of suppliers' competencies than non-experiential communication tools

The findings support our last hypothesis on the value of more experiential communication tools.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

As the results reported in Table 4 show, the tools that customers in this industry consider most useful in evaluating a supplier's value creation potential based on its competence are (in descending order of usefulness) the visits of sales representatives, product demonstrations, scientific references, and booths at exhibits or during conferences.

Except for the availability of scientific references, all the tools evaluated as more useful can be considered "experiential" in the sense that they allow the customer to establish a direct, even if sometimes temporary, relationship with a supplier. Visits of sales reps, availability of skilled people at open houses, and product demos during exhibits or in other sites, represent an

opportunity for the customer to have a pre-purchase experience of the supplier capabilities, testing its knowledge of the market, the innovativeness of its products, the flexibility and adaptability of the product portfolio.

Results of paired sample t-test demonstrate the consistency of these differences.

We are certainly not the first to recognize the importance ascribed to sales reps' visits; previous studies (cited below) have already highlighted their strategic role in BtoB marketing communications as well as in the selling activities themselves.

Given the crucial role that sales reps can play in purchasing decisions, it is worthwhile now to focus on what our findings reveal about these key players.

More specifically, for all groups of respondents, sales rep visits are important if the sales reps demonstrate a high level of technical knowledge of the products, show good scientific knowledge of the field of interest to the final users (research and scientific testing objectives, medical specialties such as pathology or physiology, and so on), and take care of the customer's problems. It is interesting to note that the sales representatives' decision autonomy and their knowledge about the markets are considered less important by our subjects.

These findings clearly support previous contributions on the strategic role of sales reps (e.g. Wotruba 1996; Peterson and Lucas 2001) and the value of the CBC approach. Wotruba (1996) also recognized the fact that the new customer's needs in regard to the communication process are transforming industrial selling. What our survey findings reveal about the nature of this transformation is that sales reps play an increasingly important role in steering the communication process towards a demonstration of the supplier's resources and capabilities, which after all is what the customer needs to know about. From this perspective, it follows that sales reps should develop new skills themselves, because they need to learn how to better understand the customer's information needs and how to adapt their own behavior in order to create the most useful pre-purchase experience for the customer.

More recently, Peterson and Lucas (2001) developed a survey that shows the most important selling dimensions required of salespeople by buyers in order to develop a partnership selling. Our study supports their insights on the importance of the seller's expertise, contribution and representation.

Our results on the value of product demonstrations and exhibitions can be interpreted through the same perspective. In this case, all the groups of respondents considered the following to be very important signs of the supplier's capabilities: the quality of people who show the product, their competence in answering questions, and their level of knowledge in providing information about the technology and the product.

On regard to the findings on scientific references, it must be said that in the medical industry they represent a critical source of information about the reliability and reputation of a supplier. In this case, citations to the supplier's product in conference papers or scientific articles (as well as the supplier's staff participation during a Round Table or as a discussant or speaker at conferences) represent the most significant source of information on the supplier's scientific competence.

In other industries, of course, these tools would be replaced by other forms of peer evaluation.

Lastly, advertising and websites were considered the two least important of the six categories rated by our subjects in evaluating a supplier value-creating potential. These results support Hypothesis 4, since these tools are less interactive and do not normally lead to an experiential, face-to-face relationship. It does not mean that they are not used at all, but rather that they are not considered as useful as other tools for the purpose of evaluating a supplier's competence. Despite this, they do get a positive ranking when they permit the customer to learn about the competence embodied in the products. For example, customers consider websites to be very valuable in informing them of the range and characteristics of a product portfolio, especially when they can be surfed quickly and easily; moreover, websites are mostly highly valued when

they provide the possibility of downloading free technical and scientific information needed by the customer.

Limitations and further development

In our study, we developed a methodology useful for pointing out the different types of competence and capabilities on which a customer relies in order to evaluate a supplier's value creation potential. Despite the accuracy of the process, the operationalization of the constructs provided is context-dependent. In order to develop studies tailored to different businesses, researchers will need to adapt our method to fit each different field of analysis.

However, our findings highlight the importance and the value of a CBC approach and create the foundation for a new research agenda in BtoB communication. Of course, many questions remain to be answered. It may be that certain questions about the ways in which different positions along the pipeline or inside an organization can lead to different processes for evaluating a supplier's competence would be better, or more fully, answered through the development of different research designs involving more qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, semiotic interpretation, or in-depth, open-ended interviews.

Moreover, even if our findings on the more useful tools are consistent with those of previous studies, we believe we have provided a new perspective in explaining their value for the customer. Certainly, there is room for further exploration of these issues. For example, additional focused surveys could be devoted to exploring in greater depth the perceived contribution of individual tools in order to evaluate a supplier's value-creating potential.

One of the primary objectives of our research project has been to begin/expand discussion of a new research agenda in BtoB marketing communication, as well as to raise new questions for it.

This working paper may thus be regarded as a first contribution towards those goals.

Table 1 – Tools and examples of related characteristics, features, and signs used in supplier evaluation in the medical diagnostic industry

Communication tools	- Characteristics, features, signs
- Advertising and flyers/brochure	innovation and creativity of the advertising campaign, breadth and duration of the advertising campaign, description of the product (e.g., its innovations, its performance record, etc.), examples of product application, ...
- Supplier's website and portals	innovation and creativity of the site, range of the products represented, price information, free downloadable technical and scientific information, ...
- Sales Representatives	technical product knowledge possessed by the supplier's representative, general knowledge level, good scientific knowledge of the customer's field of interest (e.g., pathology/physiology/research and scientific testing objectives), care of the customer's problems and work objectives, ...
- Exhibitions and conferences during exhibitions	booth size, product display, product demonstration, presentation of specific applications used by existing customers, range of products, quality of people at the exhibit, including presence of skilled people to discuss the questions or problems related to the product, ...
- Scientific references/reliability	citations to supplier's products in conference papers or scientific articles, participation of supplier's scientific staff among the speakers or the discussants of the conference, supplier's staff participation during a Round Table, conference or research paper sponsorship by the supplier, ...
- Product demos (at the supplier's seat or open house, at customer's seat)	presentation of specific applications used by other customers, examples of innovative capacity, range of products, quality of people at the demos, including skilled people to discuss questions or problems related to the product, ...
- Other	market share, sales quantity for the products, breadth of the business activity in other sectors, alliances and joint-ventures with other firms or scientific authorities, list of important customers as references, ...

Table 2 – The weight given by different categories of customers to different components of a supplier's competence in purchasing decisions

Weight of factors influencing a purchase (in%)	For manufactures		For distributors		For health care/research organizations		For all the respondents	
	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.
a) Features, technology and performance of products	41.92	24.03	40.09	19.35	43.24	26.57	41.0	21.95
b) Supplier's capability to adapt product to customer's needs	18.34	13.26	18.68	14.65	18.82	9.61	18.31	13.32
c) Supplier's medical and scientific competence	21.14	13.41	19.06	14.71	19.41	16.57	19.96	14.86
d) Capabilities of technical assistance and other services	18.53	11.13	21.89	11.86	18.53	12.84	20.58	11.99
<i>Total weight assigned to fluid competencies (b+c+d)</i>	58.01	24.13	59.63	19.24	56.76	26.57	58.85	21.93

Table 3 – The weight given by different categories of customers with different supply pattern (or structure) to different components of a supplier’s competence in purchasing decisions

Weight of factors influencing a purchase (in %)	Weights of regular suppliers on the total (supply pattern)			
	0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%
N	8	17	28	60
	mean	mean	mean	mean
a) Features, technology and performance of products	28.75	36.12	38.00	45.42
b) Supplier’s capability to adapt product to customer’s needs	30.00	18.97	19.68	19.03
c) Supplier’s medical and scientific competence	20.63	22.94	19.36	16.20
d) Capabilities of technical assistance and other services	20.63	22.00	19.36	19.32
<i>Total weight assigned to fluid competencies (b+c+d)</i>	71.25	63.91	61.46	54.55

Table 4 – Level of usefulness of different communication tools

<i>Usefulness of communication tools in evaluating supplier’s value potential (*)</i>			
	N	means	s.d.
Sales Reps	161	5.59	1.62
Products Demos	159	5.57	1.69
Scientific references	158	5.21	1.73
Exhibitions	162	4.99	1.63
Web Sites	161	4.52	1.70
Advertising	160	4.13	1.78

(*)Sources rated on a seven-point scale ranging from *Absolutely useless* to *Absolutely useful*

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