

Relationship Transparency in Industrial Marketing

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Abstract

The presence of substantial information asymmetries, product complexity, the long-term nature of many of the products/contracts and the relatively high degree of perceived risk together suggest that the development of effective customer relationships is of particular importance in industrial marketing. Such a relationship can be built by developing relationship transparency between the interacting partners. There is considerable amount of research acknowledging that transparency can substantially influence the relationship between interacting parties. However, the empirical documentation is slimmer despite the fact that transparency is becoming a vital component of services/products that today's customers buy. Furthermore, research to date on transparency is very scattered and is very context specific.

The paper addresses these concerns by reviewing the extant literature in transparency. It provides a detailed discussion on the concept of relationship transparency as well as elucidates its expected relationship with some of the other salient variables particularly in the context of industrial marketing. In doing so, various definitions and conceptions of transparency given by scholars from various fields, such as corporate communication (e.g. Christensen 2002), supply chain management (e.g. Lamming, Caldwell, and Phillips 2002; Akkermans, Bogerd, and Doremalen 2004; Hofstede 2002), doctor-patient interactions (Merritt 2003), corporate governance and branding (Einwiller and Will 2002), group learning (Floren and Tell 2004), strategic alliances (Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters 2003) are examined and a definition of relationship transparency is proposed. Based on the extant literature review, the study further identifies six salient variables that are hypothesized to hold significant relationship with relationship transparency.

One of the important implications of our study on relationship transparency in industrial marketing is that it identifies a few very crucial variables which can act as direct determinant of relationship transparency in addition to explaining the probable impact of relationship transparency on trust and customer satisfaction. From a theoretical standpoint, this study can be expected to facilitate a better understanding of relationship transparency, shedding light on issues such as why certain interactions between buyers and sellers yield higher level of information satisfaction, how the subjective perception of being informed gets created, and what is its impact on buyer-seller relationship in industrial market. Managerially, the study can offer some useful guideposts to facilitate better management of relationship in industrial marketing context.

Keywords: Relationship Transparency, Buyer-Seller Relationships, Industrial Marketing

Introduction

Transparency as a construct has been investigated by scholars from many disciplines. The context has been as diverse as corporate communication (e.g. Christensen 2002), supply chain management (e.g. Akkermans, Bogerd, and Doremalen 2004; Lamming, Caldwell, and Phillips 2001; Hofstede 2002), doctor-patient interactions (Merritt 2003), corporate governance and branding (Einwiller and Will 2002), group learning (Floren and Tell 2004), strategic alliances (Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters 2003). An extensive review of the extant literature reveals that though there are a number of different conceptions and definitions of transparency, there is no commonly agreed definition of transparency and there is no serious academic effort to conceptualize relationship transparency and identify the determinants of the construct for the industrial marketing context.

To bridge this important gap in the literature, this article develops a theoretical underpinning of relationship transparency and discusses its role in development and/or maintenance of buyer-seller relationships in the context of industrial marketing. Efforts have also been made to identify the determinants of relationship transparency and the probable role that it can play in strengthening of the buyer-seller relationship in industrial markets.

Differing Conceptions of Transparency: The Theoretical Lineage

Transparency has been addressed by researchers in various disciplines. Therefore, a reasonably diverse array of definitions exists in the literature across these disciplines. In the area of supply chain relationship, the concept of transparency arose as cost transparency in late 1980s and was originally defined by Lamming (1993) as "The sharing of costing information between customer and supplier, including data which would traditionally be kept secret by each party, for use in negotiations. The purpose of this is to make it possible for customer and supplier to work together to reduce costs (and improve other factors). Cost transparency is of no value...unless its two ways". This definition has its focus on information sharing which must be reciprocal, selective and justified but not necessarily symmetrical. Lamming, Caldwell, and Harrison (1999) came up with a more refined concept of value transparency and defined it as managed, two-way, justified and selective exchange of knowledge or information flows aimed at exploiting latent value within the relationship. As evident from the definition, like cost transparency, value transparency also involves bilateral sharing of sensitive information. But the two differ in one aspect i.e. managing risk for both parties. Further, they propose that transparency in a supply relationship is intrinsically linked with action and commitment rather than posture and pretence.

Working on the similar notion of information sharing, the study by Hofstede (2002) in the context of netchains is worth discussion. He defined Transparency of netchain as the extent to which all the netchain's stakeholders have a shared understanding of, and access to, the product-related information that they request, without loss, noise, delay and distortion. The author further explains that the term transparency denotes an image of a production network in which information can flow unhindered. If the entire network is transparent, the information can be regarded as factual. Consumers can thus effortlessly find out where their products came from and how they were produced; likewise producers can find out without trouble who bought their products. This study confirms that transparency pertains to information aspect of chain and network management. Another important study on the similar lines is by Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters (2003). The authors researched transparency issues in supply chains and business networks in Dutch agriculture and food industry. The preliminary working definition that the authors came up with was Transparency is the extent to which properties of a system is made observable to the observer. But later on, the authors gave a more detailed definition of transparent system. The system is

transparent if the system's self description corresponds to the observers needs. . Their study also quotes the definition by Doz and Hamel (1998) who suggested that transparency refers to the learning opportunity that each partner affords the other, either intentionally or inadvertently...receptivity refers to the capacity of each partner to absorb the others know-how. Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters (2003) strongly support the opinions of previously mentioned authors that transparency primarily refers to 'a free flow of information' and that a lack of transparency is consequently interpreted as an 'information problem'. Authors also believed that the transparency can be used as an effective tool to build competencies to cope with increased competition in the times of global convergence.

The study which supports the above conception of transparency is the research work carried out by Akkermans, Bogerd and Doremalen (2004) in the context of computer supported collaborative supply chain planning. Their study has referred transparency as sharing data regarding current order and production statuses as well as plans and forecasts with the various supply chain partners involved.

However, the study by Christensen (2002) in the field of corporate communication has raised an entirely new aspect of transparency. He defined corporate transparency as a staging process that involves strategic disclosure, institutionalization and mimetic behavior. Unlike previously discussed authors, Christensen argues that one can not equate transparency with information availability only or assume that corporate transparency is an objective condition to which organizations need to adapt. The question of which information to provide and in which form is an equally important strategic issue for achieving transparency. The study from the field of group learning has identified transparency as one of the significant prerequisites of group-based learning. In their work, Floren and Tell (2004) have referred to transparency as an open and honest sharing of good as well as bad experiences. This study also stands out in highlighting one major characteristic of transparency i.e. transparency has a dynamic nature and develops over time.

The study by the authors Eggert and Helm (2003) is probably the only study in the context of business-to-business marketing. This study is special in the sense that in place of transparency the authors have coined an entirely new term called relationship transparency and have defined it as an individual's subjective perception of being informed about the relevant actions and properties of the other party in the interaction. This subjective perception gets created based on the perception of information exchange and of the important characteristics of the interaction partner. This conceptualization of the construct might imply that transparency is same as information. But they opine that such may not be the case always. This is due to the fact that the judgment of relationship transparency by an individual, calls for a subjective, cognitive level of relationship evaluation. And hence the notion of perception also plays an important role. This concept of transparency was viewed exactly in the same manner by Homburg C *et al.* (2002). However, they termed the concept as perceived information sharing and not as relationship transparency. Homburg C *et al.* (2002), while studying customer satisfaction in buyer-seller relationships across national boundaries with manufacturing firms at both sides of the dyad, identified perceived information sharing as one of the antecedents for building customer satisfaction. They defined perceived information sharing as the extent to which the buying firm perceives the supplier to share information that may be useful to the customer openly. The open sharing of information helps reduce uncertainty by allowing customers insight into the supplier's future plans.

Finally, we review a study from the field of non-profit organization which is quoted in the article titled "Inspiring Confidence and Trust: Issues and Answers for Nonprofits" published in the Arizona State University's newsletter titled "Nonprofit Research" (2003). Here transparency has been defined as providing sought-after information to donors, clients, and the community, which generates trust.

Relationship Transparency in Industrial Marketing: Towards Refining the Conceptualization

The above review of the literature on differing conceptions of transparency suggests two important gaps. First, the majority of the conceptions cast transparency more as open sharing of information than anything else. While the notion of openness in information sharing is certainly important, transparency is not limited to it. Second, though the literature is available on transparency, none of the extant conceptualizations are able to satisfactorily explain/define relationship transparency in buyer-seller relationship in the context of industrial marketing. This is due to the fact that in industrial market, the buyer-seller relationships are complex and more personal in nature. The buyer takes longer time to decide the purchase and the behavior of buying center is highly complex. Negotiating with such a customer is a major challenge for a seller. Therefore, the buyer's perception regarding the various kinds of exchanges that might and/or are taking place, deserve careful consideration in this context. Their perception may influence the initiation or continuation of the business/relationship as well as their satisfaction.

As it is evident from the discussion in the previous section, the core meaning of transparency i.e. the open sharing of information has remained relatively consistent across studies, but the manner in which it has been conceptualized has varied. Transparency has been conceptualized as open sharing of costing information (Lamming 1993), a learning opportunity (Doz and Hamel 1998), justified and selective exchange of knowledge (Lamming, Caldwell and Harrison 1999), extent of shared understanding and access to information (Hofstede 2002), extent of system's self-description corresponding to observer's needs (Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters 2003), sharing data regarding current statuses and future plans (Akkermans, Bogerd, and Doremalen 2004), a staging process (Christensen 2002), openness of discussions and gathering of information (Floren and Tell 2004) and an individual's subjective perception (Eggert and Helm 2003).

But none of the definitions reviewed can be satisfactorily chosen as perfect for explaining transparency, especially in the context of buyer-seller relationship in industrial market. This is primarily due to the fact that all these definitions lack in covering some or the other pertinent aspect of relationship, and hence a holistic approach is conspicuously missing. As stated earlier, majority of the studies have referred transparency to mainly open sharing of information. However, open sharing of information does not necessarily imply that the interacting partners' information need is fully satisfied. That is why a buyer or a seller may claim a relationship to be less transparent irrespective of the openness in information sharing. Hence the definition should have mentioning of the kind and/or quality of information to be exchanged with respect to the observers' information needs.

In this regard, the definition by Hofstede (2002) qualifies as it says that transparency is the access to the product related information requested by the interacting partner, which is provided without loss, noise or delay and distortion. But disclosure of product related information alone does not effectively address the overall information need of an observer. In a buyer-seller relationship in industrial marketing both the parties require various types of information pertaining to allied services, industry, competition etc. These aspects have been ignored in the Hofstede's (2002) definition of transparency. The same criticism is found to be applicable in case of the definition by Akkermans *et al* (2004) as well. They have also referred to transparency as the sharing of data regarding the current orders, production statuses, future plans and forecasts. This definition misses on fulfillment of the information requirement front as well. However, conceptualization by Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters (2003) has been found to completely stress the aspect of fulfillment of observer's information need by saying that transparency refers to the extent of system's self-description corresponding to observer's needs. Same is the case with the definitions by Lamming, Caldwell, and Harrison (1999) and the one given in the Arizona State University's newsletter. But these definitions have one significant weakness in common. Since it's a matter of a buyer or a seller's individual perception whether the information provided to them is matching with their information requirement or not, hence transparency should be considered as subjective perception. Whereas, Eggert and Helm's (2003) definition of relationship transparency meets the criterion of fulfilling the observer's information need and

also highlights the fact that transparency is a subjective perception of an observer. However, Eggert and Helm's (2003) concept of transparency ignores the perceptions of openness during the interactions between buyer and seller which involve decision making as well as various actions on the part of both parties.

Thus it is clear that all the definitions of transparency that are reviewed have been found too constricted to be used for defining relationship transparency in the context of industrial marketing. Hence, an attempt has been made to redefine the construct of relationship transparency for the present study in the following section.

Relationship Transparency: Proposed Definition and Conceptualization

We propose to define relationship transparency as an observer's subjective perception of exchanges being open during the interactions between buyer and seller. This is achieved primarily through the exchange of complete information pertaining to the various actions and decisions as per the observer's requirement.

There are two important aspects of our definition that need attention. First, the Transparency is an observer's subjective perception. This aspect is consistent with the Eggert and Helm's (2003) conceptualization. In industrial marketing, an observer could be a buyer or could be a seller. Their individual opinion of the level of transparency is based on their respective mental structures of beliefs and assumptions. When a buyer and/or a seller believe that their information needs are satisfied by the interacting party, the level of transparency will be higher and vice versa. Second aspect is pertaining to the openness of exchanges during the interactions in buyer seller relationship. Even the diverse conceptualizations have also consistently implied that transparency mainly concerns with the open sharing of information. We advance the definition by taking into consideration the perception of openness of marketing exchanges. As per Baggozi (1975), marketing exchanges involve not just the exchange of goods, services and money, but also mutual transfer of psychological, social and other intangible entities. Hence it widens the scope of the definition and covers all major aspects pertaining to which an observer may require information.

Having defined relationship transparency in the preceding section, an attempt is made in the following section to identify and discuss key variables that may act as determinants of relationship transparency in addition to its probable impact on building trust and satisfaction amongst customers specifically in industrial

Relationship Transparency and Knowledge about interacting partner's information need

Hofstede (2002) opines that knowing what information stakeholders need, in the context of supply chain management, is a precondition to transparency. Christensen (2002) also supports this view in his study in the context of corporate communication and states that one must understand the information needs of the interacting partner.

Specifically talking of industrial marketing, Anderson and Narus (1999) have reported that with the knowledge of the customer firms' purchasing process, business market managers are in a far better position to develop marketing strategies, sales presentations and promotional efforts that can successfully inform and influence purchasing decisions. The understanding of each other's need helps in customizing the offerings as well as the sharing of information accordingly. Hence knowledge of the interacting partner's information needs should be a potential determinant of relationship transparency in the context of industrial marketing. Therefore, knowledge about interacting partner's information need will result in higher levels of relationship transparency.

Relationship Transparency and Collaborative relationship

As Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters (2003) suggest, an effective collaborative relationship between a buyer and a seller's organizations enables transparency. This approach appears to be justified because realization of transparency seems impossible if no agreement is reached among the interacting partners concerning information exchange. According to Anderson and Narus (1999), collaborative exchange involves a process where a customer and a supplier firm form strong and extensive social, economic, service and technical ties over time. Sharing more information reduces information asymmetry as well as the potential for opportunism. Through the example of collaborative relationship between Japanese suppliers and automakers, Dyer (1997) has also highlighted the fact that by sharing tremendous amount of information on their costs, methods of production, technology, and so forth, the interacting parties reduce the ability of each other to behave opportunistically by concealing relevant information. Their supplier selection process is also such that Japanese automakers screen for suppliers who are willing to share information. The supplier's willingness to share information is viewed as a signal of supplier's trustworthiness. Higher the willingness, higher is the trust; higher the trust, higher is transparency. Hence, collaborative relationship should be one of the determinants of relationship transparency in the context of industrial marketing and that collaborative relationship should result in higher levels of relationship transparency.

Relationship Transparency and Cultural Similarities between the Interacting Partners

Similarities between partners influence the shared understanding and interpretations of the description and needs (Beulens, Dijk, and Duysters 2003). A large cultural distance reduces mutual information exchanges (Larsson *et al.* 1998; Simonin 1999). As Anderson and Narus (1999) have discussed, when the supplier and customer managers do not have a common language that they are comfortable using for business discussions, one or both parties need to employ interpreters. Use of interpreters thus lengthens the time needed for the business discussions, changes the "atmosphere" of the discussion and sometimes even result in increased chances of misunderstanding. In the view of this, cultural similarities should be considered as a strong determinant of relationship transparency in industrial market. Hence, one can expect that cultural similarities between the interacting partners should enhance the level of relationship transparency.

Relationship Transparency and Trust

Trust exists in a buyer-seller relationship when one party has confidence in a partner's reliability and integrity. Anderson and Narus (1990) describe it as "the firm's belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm, as well not take unexpected actions that will result in negative outcomes for the firm". It has been found that a high level of trust between a buyer and a seller's organizations increases the willingness to share information and knowledge more openly and thus leads to higher levels of relationship transparency (Akkermans *et al.* 2004). Dyer and Chu (2003) also conclude in their study that trust is correlated with increased information sharing in supplier-buyer relationship. Based on this fact, trust should be a strong determinant of transparency. But, simultaneously, there exists one more school of thought according to which trust could also be an outcome of transparency (see Anderson and Narus 1990). However, we believe that at a given point of time i.e. in a single – time period perspective, for attaining higher levels of transparency, high levels of trust is essentially required. This belief is supported by Akkermans *et al.* (2004). Hence we opine that trust will result in enhanced levels of relationship transparency between two interacting partners.

Relationship Transparency and Quality of Information to be exchanged

Hofstede (2002) argues that since transparency is about effortless access to information, quality of information is a pertinent notion for achieving it. He identified three prime elements of quality of information *viz.* quality of data, quality of format and quality of meaning. While in the context of firm-to-firm relationship, Mohr and Spekman (1994) have also opined that by sharing accurate and relevant information and by being knowledgeable about each other's business, partners are able to act independently. This systematic sharing of information allows people to complete tasks more effectively;

which further leads to increased satisfaction and ultimately becomes an important predictor of partnership's success. Quality of information, therefore being the fundamental to an information exchange in any context, should be considered as a determinant of transparency as well.

Relationship transparency is not an end in itself. In-fact, it facilitates and contributes to the overall success of a relationship in a number of ways. There are qualitative as well as quantitative studies across various disciplines examining this fact. In business-to-business marketing context, Eggert and Helm (2002) concluded that relationship transparency delivers value and increases satisfaction and ultimately leads to favorable outcomes such as increased repurchase and word-of-mouth intentions. Lamming, Philips and Caldwell (2002) found that successful co-operation between customers and suppliers will require knowledge, openness and the transparency which is reciprocal and based on the mutual benefits that may be attained. Health and medicine is another important field in which the impact of subjective perception of being informed i.e. transparency between the doctor and his/her patient has been researched in depth. The study conducted by Phelan *et al.* (2000) found that women's feeling of being adequately informed by their provider (doctor) is strongly associated with their attitude. Hack *et al.* (2004) concluded that audiotapes consultations are rated beneficial by prostate cancer patients as well as by their oncologists and aid patients by facilitating perception of being informed of treatment alternatives and treatment side effects. Likewise, Deschamps *et al.* (2004) also found that Women's perception of being informed about the therapy resulted into decreased decisional conflict and increased satisfaction. Thus, one can expect relationship transparency to directly impact customer satisfaction and moderate the trust - customer satisfaction link. These impacts are elaborated in the following section.

Direct Impact of Relationship Transparency on Customer Satisfaction

Eggert and Helm (2003) argued that relationship transparency plays a crucial role in initiating and strengthening the buyer-seller relationship in industrial market. We agree with them and expect the same. More important, we suggest that relationship transparency, when covers the perception of openness of whole of the exchanges, will play far more effective role. Therefore, a buyer perceiving the relationship to be transparent is expected to have higher levels of satisfaction. Premise, here, is that the buyer would feel more confident of being thoroughly informed of all the required aspects of buyer-seller exchange as well as of the fact that the interacting party is/will not behave opportunistically. This can enhance both financial and non-financial performance of each party and hence one can expect that the level of satisfaction will go up. Hence Increase in the level of relationship transparency should increase the level of customer satisfaction.

Moderating Impact of Relationship Transparency

In addition to the direct impact of relationship transparency on customer satisfaction, we posit that relationship transparency will have an indirect impact on customer satisfaction as well. Akkermans *et al.* (2004) have argued that an increase in trust leads to increase in transparency, which improves decision making quality, which in turn leads to better supply chain performance. This then leads to habituation, which in turn increases trust further. The result of this is a vicious cycle. Therefore, it is logical to deduce that relationship transparency will have a moderating impact on the positive link between trust and customer satisfaction as well. Therefore, we argue that greater the relationship transparency between interacting partners, stronger will be the positive relationship between trust and customer satisfaction.

Discussion and Implications

Though an important concept, the concept of relationship transparency hasn't been researched well and therefore, requires theoretical development. This paper attempts to refine and advance the conceptualization of relationship transparency. Building on definitions and conceptualizations discussed in extant literature, relationship transparency is defined and re-conceptualized. Our study attempts to identify key variables that may act as the determinants of relationship transparency as well as attempts to elaborate the probable impact of relationship transparency. It is probably the first of its kind. Proposed definition explicitly incorporates the notion of information exchange as well as perception.

An important implication of our study on relationship transparency in industrial marketing is that it identifies a few very crucial variables which can act as direct determinant of relationship transparency in addition to explaining the probable impact of relationship transparency on trust and customer satisfaction. The next essential issue in model building and testing will involve development of conceptual framework and operationalization of the constructs. Our conceptualization pivots on two basic notions. First is the perception of openness of exchanges and second is the information sharing. Both of these offer potentialities for operationalisation. From a theoretical standpoint, this research study can be expected to facilitate a better understanding of relationship transparency, shedding light on issues such as why certain interactions between buyers and sellers yield higher level of information satisfaction, how the subjective perception of being informed gets created, and what is its impact on buyer-seller relationship in industrial market. Managerially, the study can offer some useful guideposts to facilitate better management of relationship in industrial marketing context.

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