The beginning of International buyer-supplier relationships – developing interfaces with customers

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Abstract

This paper is an empirical investigation of the beginning of international and industrial buyer-supplier relationships. The initiation of international buyer-supplier relationships can be looked upon as an important driving force for international growth of the industrial firm.

Using existing theoretical works on development of relationships, nine buyer-supplier relationships in high technology industrial markets are analyzed using the concepts of interfaces. It can be shown that when beginning different buyer-supplier interfaces, the expectations and uncertainties shaping much of the action differ strongly.

The study is made of four high technology firms that for various reasons intentionally try to initiate new long-term international customer relationships with a long-term intention. By using a sampling to capture the phenomenon of interest, the initial interaction between buyers and suppliers when shaping a business relationship, nine buyer-supplier dyads have been investigated.

Keywords: *Buyer-supplier relationship beginning, international expansion, customer relationships, international marketing, strategizing.*

Introduction

Consider the following situations; *1) a well-established firm introducing a new product to the market, and thereby over a relatively short period of time changing most of its customers. 2) A small international company trying to increase its business in one particular geographical market, increasing the number of customers in this area. 3) A technology start-up firm developing a product and customer base for its technological innovation. 4) An international new venture trying to increase its sales by tapping into new geographical markets with its new innovative product offer.*

Firms in these situations are all interested in knowing how relationships begin, and how they may act in order to facilitate the initiation and development of relationships. In this article, we investigate firms in these situations in order to increase our understanding of how buyer-seller relationships begin.

Since the 1980s a move in industrial markets from adversarial one-off relationships to collaborative exchange relationships have been documented and described in different studies (Ford, 1980; Håkansson, 1982; Dwyer et al. 1987, Heide, 1994). These long-term exchange relationships can be seen as the norm in many industries, calling it "sticky markets" (Hedaa, 1996) or mature industries (Narayandas and Rangan, 2004), and therefore firms looking for new customers are looking at the challenge of initiating new relationships. Generally speaking marketing managers constantly face the challenge of maintaining important relationships at a reasonable level, tapping into new relationships, where some turn into important ones and others not. Knowing and understanding the process of initiation and development of buyer-supplier relationships is therefore of the utmost importance for marketing managers (Ring and Van der Ven, 1994).

In the academic literature, relationship marketing has been characterized as a fundamental reshaping of the marketing field (Webster, 1992), looking at market exchanges as episodes within the atmosphere of the relationship (Ford, 1980). Earlier studies on development of relationships (Ford, 1980; Dwyer et. al, 1987; Larson, 1992; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Batonda and Perry, 2003) have come up with interesting observations of the evolution of dyadic relationships. Few of these pay particular attention to the processes taking the relationship from one stage to the other (Wilson, 1995). Although results are conflicting, all different models and conceptualizations describe some kind of process needed for initiating long-term buyer-seller relationships.

Why should researchers be interested in buyer-supplier relationship beginnings?

Long-term exchange relationships are relatively stable, but there still exist a substantial turn-over of actors in the relationships (Kamp, 2005), making the issue of relationship formation relevant for all firms in industrial markets. The beginning of relationships can be seen as extra relevant for researchers interested in explaining different phenomena such as:

1) The internationalization process of firms can be seen as a process of establishing and maintaining international relationships (Johansson and Vahlne, 2003; Ellis, 2000; Crick and Jones, 1999; Andersen and Buvik, 1997). For exporting firms these relationships will mainly be customer relationships.
2) Start-up firms situated in industrial markets, looking at the challenge of starting customer relationships to develop their business.
3) Firms introducing new products into emerging industrial markets not yet exploited, facing the challenge of starting new buyer-supplier relationships.

Research gaps

When looking into the formation of buyer-supplier relationships it is important to get to understand the conceptual background of business relationships in general.

A business relationship is something that is shaped by episodes between parties, at the same time influencing the episodes (Ford, 1980; Narayandas and Rangan, 2004). An episode can be a delivery of a product, technical specifications of a product, price negotiations and all other interaction activities needed in conducting business between industrial actors. Buyer-supplier relationships can be seen as the norms, procedures and the atmosphere of cooperation or conflict influencing the episodes between the two different actors (Ford, 1980; Håkansson (ed.), 1982).

In general, a variety of conceptualizations can be found of the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships i.e. an answer to the question “when does a relationship begin?” The problem of studying something that is defined as shaped by episodes between parties is the difficulties to depict the beginning of the interaction relevant for a relationship to develop (Håkansson and Ford, 2005; Hedaa, 1996). A relational exchange is characterized by a context were past, present and future interaction between the parties is of fundamental interest when trying to understand the exchange events (McNeil, 1980). Using this thought one can say that in a beginning of the relationship, the two parties does not share a common past, but are interested in sharing a common present and future. This interest into the future is the major distinctive feature of a buyer-supplier relationship formation process, compared with a one-off transaction. The problem is that in the initial phase of interaction, a relationship is not yet developed, and one cannot be sure that a relationship will develop between the two parties. As an example of this, it is not possible to distinguish empirically ex ante the price and delivery negotiations of a first product delivery between a buyer and supplier as a process of forming a relationship, or as a mere transaction between the parties. The uncertainty of whether a relationship will take form or not, will be shown as a mayor explanatory factor in shaping the interaction between buyers and sellers in the beginning of relationships.

Little empirical research

Given the importance of understanding the processes of starting new buyer-supplier relationships in certain situations, one can find surprisingly little empirical research looking specifically into this phenomenon. Of the empirical work looking at development of buyer-seller relationships or development of alliances, all work has been done on “important” relationships, i.e. relationships that were important for the focal firm at the time of inquiry. So, one can with confidence say that the knowledge we hold today of relationship beginning and development is based on important relationships. Of the empirical research that exists, three main streams can be found. Research looking at the internationalization process of firms by understanding the beginning of international business relationships (Andersen and Buvik, 2002; Johanson and Vahlne, 2003; Ellis, 2000; Bradley et al., 2005; Batonda and Perry, 2003), research looking at general development of relationships (Ford, 1980; Dwyer et. al, 1987; Larson, 1992; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994) and researchers looking at specific factors influencing relationship formation (Biong and Selnes, 1995; Ellram and Edis, 1996; Moncrief and Marshall, 2005; Kamp, 2005).

All these streams shed important light on issues concerning relationship formation, but none of the researchers have per se investigated the processes taking two economic actors from a situation of possible mutual economical potential into a situation of interaction to make this potential materialize. One important exception is the study of Narayandas and Rangan (2004) who explicitly study the “nature of interfirm interactions at the outset and the process of relationship initiation”. They point out the existing voids in our understanding of the changing dynamics in relationship management, mostly due to the proliferation of cross-sectional designs. Rangan and Narayandas (2004) investigated three major relationships in retrospect, and looked specifically at the initial governance structure (power situations) and how the buyers and suppliers evaluate each other in the beginning using expectations and goal fulfillment as important governance mechanisms.

The retrospective study of Rangan and Narayandas (2004) exemplifies to a high degree the current standing in our knowledge of the processes inherent in the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships. The study is made of existing and important business relationships, and can be seen as “success stories” seen from a relationship initiation perspective. Much can be learned from studying important relationships in retrospect, but this article wants to take our understanding a bit further. To advance this; none of the firms knew in advance that the interaction going on between the two parties would lead to an important business relationships. One can assume that maybe most relationships develop into not so important relationships for the actors involved, and the issue of starting relationships can be a question of keeping possibilities open for future business opportunities. Some of the relationships develop into important ones for a certain time period, while others stay at a relative low level of importance. So, it is not unnatural to think that the *business interaction episodes taking place in the beginning of a relationship looks very different in the present state compared to in retrospect, when it is known what was important episodes and what was not.*

Another important gap in existing research is the lack of attention to the characteristics of the buyer-supplier relationships which are developed. It is easy to see that two firms dealing with a multibillion contract of common development of a cutting edge technology encounter different challenges than two firms negotiating future supplies of a fairly standardized product. Still, both situations can conceptually be seen as the beginning of a buyer-supplier relationship.

Being important or long-lasting not criteria possible to use distinguishing between different types of relationship beginnings as these issues are still unknown, the concept of (buyer-)supplier interfaces (Araujo et al., 1999) prove to have explanatory power as describing different buyer-supplier relationship beginnings.

Buyer-supplier interfaces

The topic of *supplier interfaces* is discussed extensively in Araujo et al. (1999) who focus on how a company accesses the capabilities of its suppliers through different supplier interfaces and distinguish between four types of supplier interfaces: standardized, specified, translation and interactive.

A *standardized interface* implies that the customer buys a standard product from the supplier. Such standard products may be either (1) products which comply with *de jure* standards such as BS, DIN, CEN etc. (2) products which comply with *de facto* standards, or (3) products which comply with the supplier's company standard. In any case, the *"supplier does not need to know about the user context nor does the customer need to understand the producer context"* (Araujo et al., 1999, p. 499). The customer chooses among the standardized products of the supplier, and no technical or organizational adaptations are required between the two companies regarding the features of exchanged product – only logistical adaptations are possibly made between the two companies regarding where, when, and how much of the product should be exchanged.

A *specified interface* implies that the customer buys a customized product from the supplier and that the customization is based on the customer giving the supplier quite detailed technical *"prescriptions regarding the characteristics of the product and/or how it is to be manufactured"* (Araujo et al., 1999, p. 499). In a specified interface, the customer directs the supplier on the basis of its knowledge of how the product is going to be used, and the supplier does not need to know anything about the context in which the customer will use the product. However, if the customer also (partly) prescribes how the product is going to be produced, the customer (may) need(s) to have some insight into the production capabilities of the supplier. In any case, the degrees of freedom of the supplier are limited by the detailed specifications made by the buyer.

A *translation interface* implies that the customer buys a customized product and that the customization is based on the customer's functional specifications (or a reference design) and how the supplier translates these into detailed technical specifications which it uses for producing the customized product for the customer. This implies that the main functionality of the product is described on the basis of the customer's knowledge of the context in which it is going to use the product, but that the supplier knowledge of the context in which the product will be produced is used when translating the functional specifications into technical specifications. In this case, the degrees of freedom available to the supplier are relatively high and so are, supposedly, the ability of the supplier to capture economies of scale and scope.

An *interactive interface* implies that the customer buys a customized product and that the customization is based on *"open-ended dialogue based on how the buyer and the supplier can join their knowledge of user and producer contexts and develop the specifications together"* (Araujo et al., 1999, p. 499). Whereas the three former types of interfaces require none or only one of the counterparts to have (some) insight into the context of its opposite number, an interactive interface requires that the counterparts have enough insight into each other's capabilities in order to enter into a dialogue on how the capabilities of both parties can be beneficially used. Hence, an interactive interface requires that the counterparts are, or become, partially familiar with each other's capabilities and contexts, and that the counterparts are willing to use time and efforts on relating these to one another. The assumed benefits from an interactive interface are increased efficiency but, in particular, that innovation may (also) come about across the companies' respective specialisms.

Purpose of article

Two main gaps can be extracted; A lack of empirical research using longitudinal research of relationship beginnings as they develop, and a lack of taking different relationship characteristics into consideration when describing the processes involved in buyer-supplier relationship beginnings.

To address these gaps, the purpose of this article is to empirically investigate buyer-supplier relationship beginnings in present and past state, taking into consideration that different relationship characteristic can let different processes dominate.

Research Method

To study the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships a longitudinal case research design has been chosen. The focus of the study has been on four firms trying to start new relationships for various reasons. As business relationships can be long-term endeavors, studying the beginning of these in real-time calls for purposive sampling where the likelihood of finding new relationships is high. The study has been focused around four firms, which for different reasons were in need for finding new buyers, and to do that they were in need of starting new relationships.

A relational exchange is characterized by a context were past, present and future interaction between the parties is of fundamental interest when trying to understand the exchange events (McNeil, 1980). Keeping this in mind, studying the initiation of something that is defined as consisting of several episodes, as a customer relationship is, it is difficult to know which activities will lead to relationship formation and which will not. This is one of the reasons for choosing to study intentionally initiation of customer relationships, as this discriminate the area where there is highest probability of finding relationship initiation, stressing the importance of one of the actors taking the initiator role. The empirical results need to be followed longitudinally to be certain of process outcomes and developments.

Nine dyads are included in this article. Of these are four relationships that have been (or still are as this is written) in the very start of becoming a buyer-supplier relationship, and five are historical examples of how buyer-supplier relationships started. To gather data there have been interviews with suppliers and customers, observations of meetings and studies of documents (contracts, general firm information, annual reports etc.). Three of the firms have been followed at international trade fairs, including participation in planning sessions and evaluation of meetings held at the trade fairs.

The beginning of relationships is in many cases sensitive due to contract negotiations and high uncertainty regarding the actors involved. It has therefore not been possible to interview all potential customers. In these cases observations of meetings and document studies have represented the most important sources of information. Due to this sensitivity all company and product names have been disguised.

Trying to take the aspect of different types of buyer-supplier relationship beginnings meeting different challenges, this study looks not only at “important” or big buyer-supplier relationships, but relationships of seemingly various importances. The relationships still being in the beginning, it is not possible to distinguish yet the “importance” of the dyad, something that is most easily done in retrospect.

The inclusion of both the beginning of ongoing relationships and relationships in the shaping have given the researchers new insights of how the process of beginning relationships is perceived by the actors involved. By using the method of systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), using the existing data and theory to develop new ideas, going back to the firms investigating the new ideas a rich insight into the various dyads developed have come into being.

By using in-depth longitudinal research designs compared with earlier scholarly findings the goal is to discover new aspects of the customer initiation process, guided by a small sample of industrial firms. This will be the first empirical study focusing only on the initiation of industrial customer relationships. As mentioned earlier initiation of customer relationships can be important for many reasons. The reason triggering this research was the obvious need for newly established firms to establish customer relationships with customers looking for long-term partners. Therefore the inclusion of such firms in the empirical material is believed to be important.

Field research findings

We describe our findings and interpretations along a longitudinal dimension that highlights the important episodes of each relationship beginning process. Firstly, the initial situation in the nine dyads is analysed. This is followed by a description and discussion of the first contact approach found in the different dyads studied. Lastly, an analysis of how different buyer-supplier interfaces are shaped is presented.

Initial situation – before contact

The focal case companies were all in a situation looking for new customers i.e. aiming at beginning new relationships with customers. The kind of relationship they initially were looking for was to a certain extent given in advance as a result of technology involved, standardisation of the products involved and management resources available.

The following table shows the initial situations for the firms used in this study. It is also shown which of the dyads that are historical (relationships that did materialize and exist today) and which relationships were in the beginning during the period of study.

Focal company (supplier)	**Customer (buyer)**
Metalcomp Metalcomp is a well-established firm that have produced and sold a high technology product for industrial customers on the global market for over 60 years. Metalcomp has the last seven years changed their customer base almost entirely. The change in customer base was ignited by an investment in a new production technology, changing the characteristics of the product Metalcomp was selling, from now on called Hardsand. The new product can be classified as more "high end" and gave both higher profits and more demanding customers. Hardsand can be used for different applications and in different industrial processes. The focus of this study has been on one of the two main customer segments for this new high end product, customers within the Energy sector. Metalcomp was looking to increase its market in Eastern Europe by finding new buyers of Hardsand during the study. Long experience in handling international relationships.	**Germainergy (historical beginning)** One of the world's biggest users of Hardsand. At the time of beginning the relationship the specifications of Hardsand was not standard, and Germainergy was pushing forward the development of qualified suppliers. Germainergy was using other suppliers of Hardsand. Looking for secure and steady supplies of quality Hardsand for increasing future demand.
	Norwenergy (historical beginning) Was at this period of time an entrepreneurial firm struggling to develop production. The firm was situated geographically close to Metalcomp.
	Ukrainergy (present beginning) Had existing deliveries of Hardsand from competitors. Opening a new factory in Spain, opening up for new suppliers for this new location.
	Russmetal (present beginning) Had existing deliveries of Hardsand from competitors. Did not signal any wish to change supplier.
Chemcomp Selling special analytical chemicals to a global market, especially within chemical analysis related to the oil industry, pharmaceuticals and environment. The firm is small on a global scale, and holds medium experience in international business. Chemcomp wanted to increase its business in Canada, and launched a project to get to know existing customers better and get in contact with new ones.	**Oil-lab (historical beginning)** This analytical laboratory was working on a project on air-pollution. During this project they needed some special analytical chemicals.
	Research-lab (historical beginning) This analytical laboratory was working on some research connected to metal cutting. Needed some special analytical chemicals.
Mobilecomp Mobilecomp is a high-tech entrepreneurial firm that has developed a new technology for media streaming to mobile devices. The technology has not yet resulted in a finished product to sell. The firm was looking for collaborative agreements to	**Media-firm (present beginning)** Media-firm produces technology solutions for broadcasters on a global scale. The firm wanted to bring its media content out on mobile devices, but did not hold the technology to do this.

be able to develop the technology into sellable applications. Low experience in handling international business relationships.	
Watercomp Watercomp is producing and selling technology for water purification on a global scale. The firm is young and is in need of finding customers for its new solutions. It is especially important to find customers that can work as reference projects for furthering future sales.	**Taiwanconstruct (historical beginning)** This Asian firm is supplying water for different premises in Asia. Is in need of sub-suppliers of technology for water purification under different environmental conditions.
	Chinafirm (present beginning) There were plans on investing on a water purification plant in China, and Chinafirm needed technology providers for this.

From the field data it did not seem possible to find any single one process explaining the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships. By splitting up the findings on the basis of the different interfaces being developed, the observations made more sense i.e. giving a strong indication that buyer-seller relationship initiation is best modeled and explained by including the part of the context it is put into.
As can be seen from these different initial situations, the buyer-seller dyads have to develop into different interfaces to be able to reap economic benefits for both parties. Given the initial situations described, including the different firms' strategic intents, the interfaces possible in these initial situations seem bounded. The following table gives an overview of the types of interfaces needed for reaping benefits from the buyer-supplier relationships, given the initial situations of the firms in this study.

Buyer-supplier interface	**Comments**
Standardized 1) Chemcomp-Oil-lab 2) Metalcomp-Russmetal 3) Metalcomp-Ukrainergy	1) Oil-lab needed some special chemicals available from Chemcomp's stock. No adaptations needed for any side of the dyad. 2) And 3) Russmetal and Ukrainergy needed steady supply of Hardsand for their production. Both firms complying with industry standards set for Hardsand deliveries. Only price and delivery negotiations needed.
Specified 4) Chemcomp-Research-lab	4) Research-lab being in need of some chemicals not available anywhere, they specified the characteristics of the compounds to Chemcomp.
Translation 5) Watercomp-Taiwanconstruct 6) Watercomp-Chinafirm 7) Metalcomp-Norwenergy	5) And 6) In both cases the customers where in need of a technology resolving their water problem. Not important how, as long as the solution was acceptable. 7) Norwenergy was at this period of time an inexperienced user of Hardsand. Was in need of some cutting functions, but Metalcomp was allowed to make these into product specifications.
Interactive 8) Mobilecomp-Media-firm 9) Metalcomp-Germainergy	8) Mobilecomp's technology was only an idea, and much common product development was needed to put the technology into the context of Media-firm to give economical benefits. 9) Metalcomp was new in producing Hardsand and did not have extensive knowledge of the inherent properties of the product. Germainergy was interested in developing competent and secure supplies.

As can be seen, some of these relationships could develop into different types of interfaces over time (i.e. Metalcomp-Germainergy has turned into a quite standardized relationship after the interactive period in the beginning developing measures for depicting product characteristics.), but in the beginning of the relationship having these starting points there is one "natural" interface for each dyad.

This can be due to either strategic moves (for example finding a demanding customer to have an interactive interface with, to get important knowledge) or a consequence of the industrial market situation the firm is situated in (i.e. to be able to sell the water purification technology, Watercomp needs to develop translation interfaces with customers).

Before contact – expectations and uncertainties

Two common issues are to be highlighted from these initial situations where no direct business interaction has yet happened in the dyads. Dealing with different industries, firms of different sizes and between different countries there is one common requirement for a business relationship to develop, independent of interface required. There has to be a belief *in mutual economic advantage* of the present and the future (Larson, 1992; Blankenburg et al., 1999) in the buyer-supplier dyad. This mutual expectation is a prerequisite for a relationship to take form. In some of the situations shown here this mutual economic advantage is rather obvious, like in the Chemcomp-Oil-lab dyad. It would cost the Oil-lab much effort, time and money to be able to produce the special analytical chemicals themselves that they only needed for this very special project. The easy and obvious way out is to seek a standardized interface with a supplier of this chemical. For Chemcomp a sale of a chemical is almost pure profit as long as it is already produced in amounts to cover world demand for a couple of years.

In other dyads, where the degree of uncertainty is higher, the mutual economic advantage is connected to the "hopes and dreams" (Kantner, 1994) of the interacting parties. This is the case in the Mobilecomp-Media-firm dyad, as the dyad involves development of an interactive interface to find technical solutions to place the media content onto mobile devices. It is easy to assume that there will be a demand for media content on mobile devices, but at the end the actors have to believe in a future mutual economic advantage.

The other issue to be raised is the uncertainties connected to initial situations between firms (Ford, 1980; Larson, 1992; Heide, 1994; Dibben et al., 2003; Batonda and Perry, 2003). Most firms are surrounded with many possible customers and suppliers, and it is difficult to know exactly what is going on in the different organisations, i.e. hold a limited network horizon (Anderson et al., 1994). Most of the firms are active in contacting different possible customers, performing market research etc trying to bridge the uncertainty. In the different dyads presented here the level of risk and uncertainty differs very much, from high uncertainty in the Watercomp – Construction-firm (a new technological concept, high cultural distance) where a translation interface is needed to accomplish any transactions, to low uncertainty in the Chemcomp – Oil-lab where a standardised interface is enough if Chemcomp has the special chemical in stock.

From our field data one can therefore say that:

Proposition 1:
For a business relationship to start it is necessary that both firms expect some kind of mutual advantage in the present and future in the dyad.

Proposition 2:
The uncertainties perceived in the initial situation will heavily influence the process of forming a buyer-supplier relationship.

First contact approach

For a buyer-supplier relationship to develop there has to be direct interaction (i.e. the buyer and supplier have to somehow exchange knowledge and products) between the parties involved. The following table shows the actions taken in the first contact situations by the firms in the dyads studied.

Metalcomp	**Germainergy**
The German sales representative of Metalcomp contacted the purchaser in Germainergy for a meeting presenting Metalcomp as a possible supplier of Hardsand. After unsuccessfully asking for a meeting a couple of times contact was mediated by a local distributor of metal that was	At this time Germainergy had two good suppliers of Hardsand, and was not necessarily interested in getting a third. Anyway, Metalcomp could not deliver the amounts needed to be interesting for Germainergy and was not considered as interesting.

a personal acquaintant of both the German sales rep. and the purchaser.	
Marketing manager of Metalcomp saw an article in a national magazine about a factory being set up. Contacted Norwenergy to be invited to their factory. CEO of Metalcomp new founder of Scanwafer personally, being of importance by being allowed to come visit.	**Norwenergy** The firm was busy setting up their new factory, and had little knowledge of Hardsand and the use of it. Norwenergy was happy to get in contact with a possible supplier of large amounts of Hardsand that was situated geographically "close".
Metalcomp saw the increasing demand in Eastern Europe coming and hired a consultant to set up meetings for them to come present their offers. Ukrainergy was contacted by the native-speaking consultant.	**Ukrainergy** Showed interest in being contacted for offers regarding their new factory in Spain. Accepted to try a sample of Hardsand in their production.
Metalcomp saw the increasing demand in Eastern Europe coming and hired a consultant to set up meetings for them to come present their offers. Russmetal was contacted by the native-speaking consultant	**Russmetal** Had existing deliveries of Hardsand from competitors. Did not signal any wish to change supplier. Accepted to receive a test sample to try out in their production.
Chemcomp Received inquiry for a substance they had in stock and gave an initial price and delivery offer.	**Oil-lab** Oil-lab was in need for some special chemicals. Looked for a possible supplier, and was referred to Chemcomp by a laboratory in Newcastle. Contacted Chemcomp directly with an inquiry for price and delivery possibilities.
Received an inquiry for price and deliveries and information about measuring methods to be used for a certain group of compounds. Information and an offer were provided.	**Research-lab** Research-lab had a catalogue from Chemcomp and contacted Chemcomp with questions concerning a certain analysis connected to some chemicals they were offering. These chemicals could not be found anywhere else but at Chemcomp.
Mobilecomp Mobilecomp was contacted by Media-firm and got the chance to present themselves at their own office premises. Mobilecomp was in the process of presenting their technology to interested parties, and this opportunity was very well received.	**Media-firm** Media-firm contacted several firms in search for technology providers to bring their media content to mobile devices. One of the companies contacted, had a CEO that was in the board of Mobilecomp. Through this contact Media-firm contacted Mobilecomp to come and visit them.
Watercomp Watercomp received inquiries from Construction-firm. This was firstly not deemed important as they receive many such inquiries without having the capacity to follow up. Construction-firm contacted Watercomp several times before the Asian agent was sent to Taiwan to meet with Construction-firm.	**Construction-firm** This Asian firm is supplying water for different premises in Asia. Is in need of sub-suppliers of technology for water purification under different environmental conditions.
Watercomp received information about possibilities in China from a person, which became their agent in China. Contacts to the project by Chinafirm were mediated through the agent.	**Chinafirm** Watercomp was contacted by a Chinese agent that personally knew about a project by Chinafirm.

This first contact phase or business episode looks rather similar for all types of buyer-supplier interfaces in this study, so it is not any use splitting the analysis up on basis of this. One could expect the personnel involved in developing the different types of interfaces to differ, as the differing interfaces hold various degrees of innovation and effectiveness (Araujo et al., 1999), demanding

different competences. Marketing people were involved in all cases in this phase, being the bridge between the two organisations.

Worth mentioning is the importance of geographical distance in this situation. It has been shown in earlier studies the importance of one actor having the *initiator role*, driving the process forward in the beginning, without the initiator nothing develops (Larsson, 1991). Having the initiator role in processes involving large geographical distances still poses a significant difference compared to trying out a meeting with a neighbouring organisation. For the marketing people travelling around half the globe and returning without a deal or having set up the next meeting is not a personal good option.

Proposition 3:
One actor needs to take the initiator role for a relationship to begin.

Proposition 4:
Large geographical distances is inhibiting for taking the initiator role.

Looking into who had the role of initiating the buyer-supplier relationships the researchers agree that most existing business relationships are initiated by the buyer (Ellis, 2000; Tuten and Urban, 2001; Doherty and Alexander, 2004; Varis et al., 2005). This finding is also supported by the finding that supplier characteristics were more important than buyer characteristics in explaining linkage formation (Martin et al., 1995). One can therefore say that there is a higher probability that most relationships are initiated by a buyer contacting a potential supplier than the other way around. This is a strong support for looking at the business environment as consisting of both active buyers and suppliers (Ford, 1980). These findings highlight the importance of focusing of both sides in a buyer-supplier dyad, as intentions from one side have equal importance as the other. It seems like a logical conclusion to draw that it is in general easier for a buyer to initiate a relationship than a supplier. That is only a consequence of most firms' obvious interest and benefits in selling more, in opposition to the more complex benefits of changing or taking upon a new supplier.

Also in this study one can see that in most of the cases the buyer had the initiative in the first contact phase. Being situated in an industrial market it is therefore of vital importance to raise the *awareness* among other actors about the firm's offerings (Ford, 1980; Dwyer et al., 1987; Hedaa, 1996). Awareness is here defined as *A's recognition that B is a feasible exchange partner* (Dwyer et al. 1987). Several examples of this can be found in the empirical material.

- Metalcomp's approach towards Norwenergy giving them information about the process where their product was used, later on resulting in large deliveries.
- Mobilecomp appointing a board member being active in one of the industries they could be interested in, making Mediafirm hearing about them in their search process for technology solutions.
- Research-lab turning over the pages in Chemcomp's product catalogue given to them at a conference, looking for certain chemicals.
- Construction-firm contacting Watercomp after seeing what they could offer on their web-site.

All these examples show that only small traces of information were needed for business interaction to get started. All firms involved in this study were well aware of the importance of keeping possible future actors aware of their existence, and took part in many activities investing in increasing general awareness. One example of this is taken from Metalcomp:

During the study questioning the marketing manager about meetings with possible customers the next few months, a business visit to a Japanese company was put forward. When asked about the expectations for this trip (taking a few days of the manager's time and being rather strenuous) the answer was that he had no reason to believe that this trip would result in any sales in the near future. The important thing as he said was to keep this company aware of Metalcomp's existence and if something unforeseen happened they would contact them for supplies of Hardsand.

Concluding on this discussion:

Proposition 5:
Building awareness is one of the most important tasks for marketing managers in industrial firms for enhancing the first contact situation when beginning buyer-supplier relationships.

Shaping the relationship

After initial contact and if there exists expectations of mutual economic advantage, the buyer-seller dyad can progress into a period of testing each other. The efforts put into this phase differ greatly for differing interfaces being developed and so do also the processes being of importance of shaping the relationships. In general this period of interaction between two unfamiliar business actors is characterized by *uncertainty* (Ford, 1980) and governed by *expectations* of each others behavior (Narayandas and Rangan, 2004) as there is no common history to build upon. This uncertainty and these expectations are reflected differently under different circumstances, here exemplified by the four generic different interfaces being shaped.

Standardized interface

Investments in these kinds of interfaces are minimal, and this is mirrored in the shaping of the relationship phase. The buyers and sellers generally quickly reach an agreement and spend as little effort as possible interacting with each other to economize the business operations. Normally there are no large logistical processes involved. The shaping of three standardized interfaces is shown empirically under.

Chemcomp-Oil-lab

After finding the special chemicals needed for their research project, Oil-lab placed an order with Chemcomp. Being satisfied with the chemicals delivered, they have continued to buy these specific chemicals throughout the entire research project. The contact between the companies was in the beginning only price/delivery related, and the two firms did not need to know much of each other to reap the benefits from the buyer-supplier dyad.

Metalcomp-Russmetal

After contact was initiated between the firms by the consultant hired by Metalcomp, Russmetal agreed on receiving a trial order to test the Hardsand in their production. Meeting Russmetal at a trade fair two months later they “had not found the time to run tests, due to tight production schedules”, expressed by their head purchaser. At this time Russmetal did not seem very interested in changing supplier, but agreed on running tests within a month. There were also some price issues discussed. A few months later Russmetal ran the tests, with negative results. Metalcomp tested the Hardsand provided to Russmetal from the competitor, and did not find any major differences that could explain why the test failed. At this time the existing supplier of Russmetal fired the person responsible for the Russmetal-account, and this person was hired by Metalcomp as their agent in Russia. Through his contacts in Russmetal, he convinced them to go through run through the tests again and they agreed. At this time, Metalcomp is a bit suspicious about the motives of Russmetal, and it is no longer seen as an important strategic goal to get them as customers.

Metalcomp-Ukrainergy

After initial contact it was put forward that it was not a straightforward task for Ukrainergy to start using the Hardsand from Metalcomp, as Ukrainergy currently was using a more pure and expensive form of Hardsand in their operations. They did not initially agree on receiving a test sample, as they did not want to change the characteristics of their production. At a later stage Metalcomp met up with Ukrainergy at a trade fair, and learnt that a new factory was going to start in Spain in a few months and they were interested in new offers for Hardsand deliveries. Ukrainergy agreed on testing a sample in their production. After this nothing happened until the same agent in Russia organized a meeting at Ukrainergy. Suddenly Ukrainergy was interested in using the kind of Hardsand provided by Metalcomp, without the managers in Metalcomp really sure of why. First deliveries of some tonnage have started.

As can be seen from the beginning of the dyads initially aiming at developing a standardised interface, a minimal investment in management time is used. The main process governing the beginning in these kinds of relationships are the observable episodes (orders placed, payment received, contracts signed, tests approved) taking place or not taking place in the dyad. This means less importance is given to more subtle hints of commitment and trust. *Expectations* are set low, and also commitment into the dyad. This can be highlighted through the Metalcomp-Ukrainergy dyad, as the managers in Metalcomp expressed low expectations of the relationship few months before receiving the first order, but suddenly the firm accepted to test their product and quickly after sent a first order with clear signals on repurchases. Seeing the tests and the order, the dyad exceeded expectations and showed

economical value. Still, price offers, service and other agreements are standardised, without Metalcomp seeing any direct need for further interaction.

Uncertainties between the actors are mostly concerning the actors involved, as the products are fairly standardized. By running a few tests, checking for references and forming a standard contract the actor uncertainty can be overcome, as long as the value of the products are fairly well known from the outset of the relationship formation.

Proposition 6:
Shaping an standardised buyer-seller relationship interface the uncertainties are mostly concerning the actors involved, and can relatively easy be overcome. Expectations are set as concrete and measurable indicators.

Specified interface
Developing a specified interface the supplier needs certain directions from the customer (Araujo, et al, 1999). By getting these directions, the buyer needs to learn about the supplier's competence. The process of starting a buyer-seller relationship aiming at a customized product can raise some different processes, as exemplified by the Chemcomp-Research-lab dyad.

Chemcomp-Research-lab
In relation to a research project, Research-lab was in need for some special chemicals. Browsing through a catalogue from Chemcomp received at conference earlier on, similar compounds was found indicating that Chemcomp also was competent of producing the substances Research-lab was interested in. Contact was made and price and deliveries was negotiated. Chemcomp produced the substances specified, and delivered as agreed upon. In addition to delivering the substances there was some contact on technical issues regarding how to use these special chemicals. The development of these substances gave Chemcomp the idea to develop a new line of chemicals later offered for other customers.

For a specified interface to begin, the competence and delivery ability of the supplier needs to be confirmed. The *uncertainty* in starting a specified interface does not lie in the product itself, as it is specified by the customer and with a known value, but in the ability to deliver the product specified by the customer. By presenting scientific results at academic conferences, at the same time handing out product catalogues and offers of special projects, Chemcomp overcame the capability-test and was considered competent by Research-lab even before actually delivering the first substance. Being in a very specialized high-tech industry, it seems fairly easy in this case to assess each others technical capabilities as long as the salespeople have the required technical understanding. This being the main point in beginning specified interfaces, having sales people with considerable technical understanding to convince potential customers that they can deliver products specified by customers. An interesting point from the Chemcomp-Research-lab dyad is that the outcome of this specified interface has been a series of substances that have led to the development of standardised interfaces with other customers of Chemcomp. The *expectations* are also in beginning specified interfaces set at fairly concrete episodes of deliveries and products offered.

Proposition 7:
Uncertainties in shaping specified buyer-supplier relationships are mostly connected to the ability of the supplier to deliver what the customer specifies. Expectations are set at concrete and measurable indicators.

Translation interface
In a translation interface the supplier needs to get to know the customer's requirements, to be able to translate these into a product offer (Araujo et. al., 1999). The shaping of translation interfaces between buyers and suppliers is described in the three dyads following:

Watercomp-Taiwanconstruct
After taking the inquiry from Taiwanconstruct "seriously", a meeting between the Asian agent of Watercomp and Taiwanconstruct was set up. The agent met with the project manager of the water project and the CEO of the company and a seriousness about this project was communicated that made both parties decide to invest more time into the dyad. Taiwanconstruct was at this time also initiating relationships to other potential technology suppliers, but left all these arrangements afterwards to focus on Watercomp. Taiwanconstruct signaled that it was a relief for them to be able to focus on only one relationship, and put their efforts into other parts of their business. Three months

later there was a new meeting at Taiwanconstruct with the Norwegian manager of Watercomp, and a contract was signed already during the meeting. At this meeting the requirements of Taiwanconstruct was made into technical specifications by Watercomp. The quick development was rather surprising for Watercomp, being a young firm without many reference customers, something other potential customers had put much weight into. It was also a very quick progress for Taiwanconstruct, but they expressed mutual trust and good faith already from the start. It is also worth mentioning that Taiwanconstruct was under a tough deadline from the government financing the whole water project, and they had to rush things forward at this stage.

Watercomp-Chinafirm
This dyad was mediated through the Asian agent of Watercomp that knew about a water project in China. A first meeting between Watercomp and Chinafirm was held in 2002, also including representatives from governmental institutions of relevance for the project. After this meeting a test installation was decided as the next step. This installation met technical difficulties due to the poor water quality in the area, but was solved to everyone's satisfaction but at a higher cost. Later Chinafirm ran into economical difficulties, and the project was postponed. During this time the project increased, and other actors came into the picture of delivering components. Due to the extended time used and the risk involved Watercomp withdrew temporary from this project, but keep contacts open until things get clearer.

Metalcomp-Norwenergy
After contacting the newly established Norwenergy, Metalcomp literally invited themselves, through using the personal connection between the CEOs of the two firms, to Norwenergy's premises. When Metalcomp came to their factory Norwenergy had problems in several areas of their production and was busy solving these. At this time Norwenergy understandably was not a big buyer of Hardsand, and they were happy to find a supplier in geographical proximity. Due to this geography, patriotism and a relative low cost strategy from Metalcomp, Norwenergy was convinced to start to use Metalcomp as their Hardsand supplier. Norwenergy had no earlier experience with Hardsand use, and accepted the specifications made by Metalcomp to solve their cutting problem. Later on Norwenergy has professionalised their operations and are by now the second largest single buyer of Hardsand globally.

When beginning to develop a translation interface, the supplier has to learn certain things about the buyer's requirements to be able to deliver a valuable product. This fact increases the supplier's investment in getting the relationship started, and thereby raising the risk involved in failing to get deliveries. In all of these three situations there was *uncertainty* from the supplier in the beginning if it was possible to deliver value to these potential customers as their needs were not clear cut at the outset. The Watercomp-Chinafirm is an example of the inherent risk for suppliers in these situations, as specifications changed during the shaping of the relationship and in the end, the size of the water project exceeded Watercomp's scope of delivery. This means that the mutual economic advantage is not clear until after a certain investment from the potential supplier, revealing the specifications from the customer.

Expectations in all these projects are high, as the amount of interaction needed to reach a relationship is relatively high, and the firms do not engage in such relationship developments without having a certain amount of confidence. Another important aspect to consider when starting these kinds of relationships is the relative imbalance in knowledge of solutions possible. Both in the Metalcomp-Norwenergy and Watercomp-Taiwanconstruct dyads the customers had little experience and knowledge about the solutions they were buying into, and finding a supplier able to deliver products to solve their problems gave them the possibility to invest their time in other more cardinal tasks. Taiwanconstruct had undertaken a supplier search, but when Watercomp came up with a satisfactory solution, they finished off all other engagements. In both these cases the timing for starting up a relationship seemed very good, as both buyers were occupied with larger projects with several uncertainties involved, being happy to be able to put one of these aside for a while.

Proposition 8:
When shaping a translational interface, the uncertainties is most strongly connected to the requirements of the customer, and if there is mutual economic advantage in forming a buyer-supplier relationship. Expectations are set high with suppliers.

Interactive interface

Starting up an interactive interface requires that both supplier and buyer acquire knowledge of each others capabilities in order to develop a relationship outcome based on a mix of each others competences. The interactive interface requires a more extensive period of interaction between the potential partners, as the outcome of the dyad is a question of creating a joint solution. This can be exemplified by the following examples.

Mobilecomp-Media-firm

After initial contacts were made and Mobilecomp had presented themselves for Media-firm, the next step was for Media-firm to bring Mobilecomp along to meet an US customer. During these meetings the managers got to know each other, and a common understanding of the future possibilities was reached. This meeting was also well received, and a decision to continue to develop a joint product was made. After a few months of extensive contact, Media-firm bought an equity stake in Mobilecomp to give them the financial means to speed up the technological development of a solution to be sold as an extra service to Media-firm's customers. In addition to technological development, Mobilecomp is allowed to talk to Media-firm's customers at trade fairs.

Metalcomp-Germainergy

During their first meeting Metalcomp presented themselves as a new possible supplier of Hardsand over a good lunch with beer. At this time Metalcomp had a small production capacity of Hardsand compared to the need of Germainergy, and the response was that they could first be considered if they increased their production.

"We could at that moment in time deliver 25 tons per year, and the response from Germainergy to this was –come back when you can deliver this per month".

This meeting formed parts of Metalcomp's decision to invest in increased production of Hardsand. There was no direct contact until a year after, when the marketing manager and German agent of Metalcomp went to visit Germainergy again. From another business relationship they had got the impression that Germainergy was short of Hardsand at that moment, and wanted to use this opportunity to get deliveries. The meeting was successful and there deliveries of some tonnage could start. Along with the deliveries technical staff at Metalcomp had to learn new measurements and invest in knowledge about how to classify Hardsand in a more accurate manner. This technological development process was in progress for a substantial time period during the first years of deliveries. Today Germainergy is the largest customer of Metalcomp.

The main process shaping the interactive interface in these two dyads was the common technological development. In the Mobilecomp-Media-firm dyad the technology of Mobilecomp could not be of use without several large alterations making it compatible with the existing solutions of Media-firm. Metalcomp-Germainergy were mostly developing measures making it possible to monitor production and quality of deliveries. In both cases *expectations* were set high and also investment early on in the relationship. In the Mobilecomp-Media-firm an equity stake investment early in the relationship showed commitment and removed much of the actor uncertainty from Mobilecomp's perspective. After engaging in the dyad, Mobilecomp has put most other development projects on hold, running a high risk of loosing important time to market for their technology solution if failing in the dyad with Media-firm. Metalcomp tied large part of their production to deliveries to Germainergy, being unable to develop other customer relationships and thereby running a risk if failing to develop a sustainable relationship.

The *uncertainties* in starting interactive interfaces are high both on the actor level and also on the positive effects of the common development possible. The beginning of an interactive interface requires that both actors involved in the dyad need to learn about each others resources, and how to best make use of these in the dyad. At the outset, without the experience of each others resources, expectations from the outcomes of the dyad can easily become odd between the parties involved. This can clearly be seen in the Mobilecomp-Media-firm dyad, were Media-firm seem to think that them bringing in a network of potential customers to Mobilecomp is the most valuable and important outcome of the dyad. Mobilecomp on the other hand values the technological knowledge in the common development project as most important.

Having high uncertainties on both actor level and product, one can suspect the shaping of the relationship period to involve more management time and include more extensive assessment of outcome and concurrent evaluation. This can also be seen from the dyads studied, that the selling firms evaluate their position towards the partner to see if any new measures need to be taken to secure expected outcome, and also assessment of which outcome is reasonable to expect. As buyer-supplier interfaces can change over time, it is natural to think that a more common path to an interactive interface is by starting with a less risky way of cooperating, learning about each others resources (Ford, 1980) and thereby seeing possibilities for future interactive common developments.

Proposition 9:
When shaping an interactive buyer-supplier relationship there are large uncertainties both concerning actors involved and outcome of the relationship. The expectations are set high.

Conclusions

The field research findings have shown that using the concept of resource interfaces (Araujo et al., 1999) to explain the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships, the context of the buying and supplying firm can be put into a meaningful framework. Most buyer-supplier relationships will bare characteristics of several of the four generic interfaces described. By separating the beginning of different types of relationships, one has a tool for describing which processes will dominate in the shaping of the relationship. As can be shown in this study, the first contact approach is not affected by the kind of interface the dyad is moving to, but the shaping of the relationship is heavily influenced by the type of interface developed.

Uncertainties

By following some of the buyer-supplier relationship beginnings in real-time, the uncertainty about both the outcome and the processes of the interorganizational venture became accentuated. The uncertainty holds different characteristics in the diverse kinds of relationships being developed.

In the *standardised interface* situation, the uncertainties surrounding the products involved are low, and the prevailing uncertainties surrounding the actors involved can be relatively easily overcome by checking for references and assessing the initial exchange episodes of the relationship.

In the *specified interface* it can be shown that the uncertainties is most strongly connected to the ability of the supplier to deliver the products specified by the customer. For the supplier the uncertainty lies in the potential customer's needs compared to ones abilities to deliver, i.e. the risk of negotiating and working towards a customer where one is not able to deliver what the customer specifies.

In the beginning of the *translation interface* the main focus of the uncertainties are regarding the possibilities of solving the customer's problem given the supplier's solutions available. The supplier needs to get a certain understanding of the customer's context to find out if there is mutual economic advantage in a buyer-supplier relationship. This can be made further difficult by dealing with a customer that is inexperienced with the area of business, not really sure of what is possible and thereof what the need is.

Beginning an *interactive interface* is challenging since both the buyer and supplier needs to learn about each others competences to reap benefits from the relationship. The outcome is dependent on both buyers' and suppliers' abilities, and also how well they are able to combine their resources. Therefore uncertainties are high, leading to concurrent evaluation and assessment of the situation in the relationship.

Expectations

The other construct found influencing the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships was the expectations held in the different situations. Before there can be any buyer-supplier relationship there need to be mutual economical advantage, i.e. an mutual expectation that working together somehow will be better than not doing that. This expectation holds for all kinds of interfaces being developed.

In the beginning of both standardized and specified interfaces the expectations are set relatively low and focused on concrete and measurable aspects. This is due to the relative low uncertainty in the product involved, being easy to see what to expect and consequently what to assess.

When starting a translational interface with a buyer, the supplier needs to make an investment in finding the requirements of the counterpart. Due to the uncertainty concerning this investment, the expectations with the supplier are set high. Otherwise the supplier would not open up interaction aiming at starting a relationship, as the uncertainties involved demand a certain level of expectations.

The beginning of an interactive interface is the most demanding and uncertain, and therefore expectations are set high with both the supplier and buyer. Being resource demanding, both actors should expect higher outcomes. The problem when shaping expectations in the beginning of an interactive interface is that the outcome is unclear, being dependent of a counterpart not well known. Developing an understanding of what is possible and creating common grounds for shaping expectations that can be fulfilled is an important task for managers involved in shaping an interactive buyer-supplier interface.

Limitations and future directions

Our contribution is directed towards theory building of the beginning of industrial buyer-seller relationships. Using a mixture of observations, document studies, interviews and multiple participant seminars relating to ten buyer-seller relationships the findings are based on through research. Like all qualitative studies, the number of firms studied raises a lack of statistical generalisability of the interpretations presented in this article. By carefully choosing to follow processes in different companies, between different countries and in various industries we strongly believe that the themes considered of the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships are of general character. The buyer-supplier dyads studied have all been in high-technology industries, strictly being between industrial firms. Focus of the study has been on the selling firm, including interviews with some of the buyers. Future studies could try to include using buying firms as focal starting point for inquiries.

Like Narayandas and Rangan (2004), it can be shown here that relationships are complex and cannot easily be put into categories or elegantly explained by theory. This is another attempt at using process research explaining characteristics influencing the development of relationships in industrial markets. More empirical work is needed, and using longitudinal real-time research seems a promising path to follow.

This article has focused on the impact of uncertainties and expectations in the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships where the actors did not have any prior common history. One interesting continuation of this could be to compare the process of beginning a new buyer-supplier relationship with the process of changing the way to work within an existing relationship. Within a dynamic environment, when is it better to make adaptations within existing relationships, and when is it better to start new relationships?

When looking at the beginning of buyer-supplier relationships one can easily see that the firms interacting are connected through common technologies, industrial structures (like trade fairs) and industry norms of behaviour. Ford and Håkansson (2005, pp.10) see this as "*new actors and new relationships always emerge from something that pre-exists them and there is always a history behind them*". A question that arises using this view is what is new in a "new" relationship?

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