

Taxonomy of Customer Reference Communication – A Pilot Case Study in the ICT Sector

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Anne Jalkala

Lappeenranta University of Technology
P.O. Box 20, 53851 Lappeenranta
Finland
anne.jalkala@lut.fi

Risto T. Salminen

Lappeenranta University of Technology

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to develop a taxonomy of reference communication by studying reference communication situations at different phases of customer relationship development. The empirical part of the study is conducted as a pilot case study from the Finnish ICT-sector. We argue that the development phase of relationship between the supplier and the reference customer determines different situations for reference communication, and should be taken into consideration when planning communication strategies for reference utilization. The study outlines a conceptual framework of reference communication based on a literature review, and introduces findings from a pilot case study. Empirical data of the pilot case study was gathered through personal interviews and internal documents from a Finnish ICT company. Based on the findings from the pilot case study, a taxonomy of reference communication is proposed, and four types of referencing situations depending on the development phase of the reference relationship are described. Preliminary findings from the pilot case study indicate that the development phase of the reference relationship determines different situations for reference communication. The study contributes to the industrial marketing communication research and to the emerging theory of reference utilization by clarifying the role of references within the field of marketing communication and by increasing the understanding of how customer relationships can be used as references at different stages of their life-cycle.

Keywords: customer references, marketing communication, business relationships, industrial marketing

Introduction

In today's highly competitive economy, companies operating in business-to-business markets have a growing need to establish credibility among potential customers and signal their ability to do what they promise. Customer references are an important tool for creating and maintaining this credibility. Business managers have long recognized the importance of having good references, and the importance of references has been recently identified also in academic research (e.g. Salminen 1997; Helm 2000; Salminen and Möller 2006).

The scientific research in industrial marketing communication has emphasized the need to conduct research about industrial marketing communications practices and their effectiveness (e.g. Gilliland and Johnston 1997). However, at the same time, there is a demand to move the focus from the traditional marketing communication research focusing on mass-communicative effects to the interpersonal communication processes occurring within business relationships (Olkkonen, Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi 2000). The importance of relationships and networks for companies operating in industrial markets is emphasized within the IMP Group of researchers, and has been often contrasted with the traditional consumer-oriented marketing mix approach (e.g. Arndt 1979; Håkansson 1982; Håkansson and Snehota 1995). It has also been suggested that due to the importance of

relationships, also the role of communication is different in the field of industrial marketing and thus, industrial marketing communication research should move towards relationship and network thinking (Olkkonen, Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi 2000, p. 403). Communication of customer references can be seen as a one example of the type of marketing communication, where relationships are of central importance.

In many industrial companies, marketing communication activities are largely based on utilizing the company's existing portfolio of customer relationships as references. Thus, customer references play an important role in the content of industrial companies' marketing communication. However, in the field of industrial marketing communication research, studies focusing on customer reference utilization are scarce, and the role of reference communication within the field of marketing communication has not been clarified. Moreover, the relationship marketing approach to communication tends to neglect the role of supplier-initiated marketing communication in the pre-relationship phase and in the phase, in which customer relations are established (Andersen 2001, p. 169). This study aims to fulfill this gap by exploring how the dynamic aspect of business relationships influences the reference communication situation, and how customer relationships can be utilized as references at different stages of the relationship development. The study contributes to the industrial marketing communication literature and to the emerging theory of referencing (e.g. Salminen and Möller 2006) by clarifying the role of reference communication within the field of industrial marketing communication, and by adopting a relational approach to studying reference communication.

The article is structured as follows. *First*, the purpose of the study and the research questions are introduced as well as the methodology through which the findings are made. *Second*, references as a research object and previous studies on reference utilization are briefly introduced and a conceptual framework of reference communication is proposed based on the literature review. *Third*, the framework is illustrated by using a pilot case study from the Finnish ICT-sector. Based on the conceptual framework and findings from the pilot case study, a preliminary taxonomy of different reference communication situations is proposed and communication issues in each situation are discussed. *Finally*, conclusions from the findings of the pilot case study are made and further steps in the research process are discussed.

Purpose of the Study and the Research Method

The purpose of the study is to *develop a taxonomy of reference communication by studying how the development phase of the reference relationship influences the reference communication situation*. Consequently, the research questions are as follows:

1. How does the development phase of customer relationship affect the utilization and communication of that particular reference?
2. How customer relationships can be utilized and communicated as references at different stages of the relationship development?

The research questions are answered through a literature review of relevant industrial marketing communication literature, and by conducting a pilot case study from the Finnish ICT sector. The study continues a work done in a previous study, which explored how companies communicate their customer references on their Web sites (Jalkala and Salminen 2006). The study used three Finnish ICT companies as case companies and revealed three main goals that these companies have adopted in their reference communication. The present study continues this research by focusing on examining the reference communication practices of one of these companies as a pilot case study, and by examining how customer relationships at different stages of their life cycle are utilized and communicated as references in the case company.

Customer References as a Research Object in Industrial Marketing

Customers and customer references are becoming increasingly important assets especially for companies operating in highly competitive areas, such as the ICT-industry. Use of customer references is an important marketing practice in industrial marketing and there are various practices through which companies utilize their references. These include reference visits to the customer's

plants, articles in trade journals, brochures of customer cases handed out together with an offer, as well as communicating references through the Internet.

Business managers have long recognized the importance of having good references and recently, references and their usage have started to receive also increased academic attention. Salminen (1997) has studied the role of references in international industrial marketing, and Salminen and Möller (2006) have identified the potential modes of reference usage and proposed a conceptual framework of references. Regarding reference utilization practices, the success factors of a reference visit have been examined (Salminen 2001), as well as the use of references in industrial bidding (Salminen and Möller 2004). Helm (2000) has approached the referencing phenomenon from a slightly different perspective by studying customer referrals and motives for recommendations. Also, reference descriptions in company Web sites have been examined by using content and discourse analysis as research methods (Jalkala and Salminen 2006).

The Concept of Reference

Reference is a concept, which is rarely used in marketing research. In managerially oriented magazines, however, the word reference is used quite frequently. For example, terms such as “customer references,” “client list,” “supplier references,” “client references,” and “user references” are often used (Salminen 1997, p. 17). Business managers often consider successful deliveries of equipment, services, or projects to customers as references. In addition to individual deliveries, the names of existing customers are considered and used as references. Salminen (1997, p. 311) defines the concept of reference as follows: “A reference is the supplier’s relationship to its existing or former customer that can be evaluated by that customer in terms of the supplier’s product, service, management, and cooperation performance.” This definition considers reference as a *relationship*, not only as a single delivery or discrete transaction. Thus, in the present study, reference communication is understood as the type of marketing communicating that utilizes company’s existing or previous customer relationships in order to attract potential new customers.

References in Industrial Marketing Communication Research

In the industrial marketing communication research, studies focusing especially on the phenomenon of reference communication do not seem to exist, although the importance of references is recognized. Andersen (2001, p. 172) relates references as a marketing communication activity to awareness building and reputation management. According to Andersen (2001, p. 174) reputational management and management of referrals and references are relevant tools especially at the pre-relationship phase of the relationship. When examining value creation in buyer-supplier relationship from the supplier’s perspective, Walter, Ritter and Gemünden (2001, p. 368) proposed that especially large and reputable customers that are known of using high criteria in their supplier selection may have a valuable reference effect.

In the field of industrial purchasing literature, references have been often mentioned as being one of the important factors affecting purchasing decisions. When examining the relative importance of persuasion modes in industrial marketing, Parasuraman (1981, p. 280) found that specifications were the most important factors, followed by recommendations of other buyers and personal selling. Slatter (1987, p. 203) has found that establishing the supplier’s credibility is one of the major aspects of sales visit in a purchasing process involving competitive bidding, and photographs of reference projects were typically used as an aid in establishing credibility (Slatter 1987, p. 203).

Recently, a view of marketing communication that focuses on emphasizing the supplier’s skills, resources, and competences has been introduced (Golfetto 2003). This competence-based communication (CBC) differs from other approaches to marketing communication especially in terms of the content by moving away from communicating about product features to communicating about the resources and capabilities of the supplier (Golfetto 2003, p. 7). The view proposes ‘experiential’ communication tools, through which the suppliers’ skills can be tested and compared. Utilization of references, for example through reference visits, can be seen as a one form of competence-based marketing communication as references provide evidence of the supplier’s capabilities and competence. The CBC approach has been studied also from industrial customers’ perspective, and

these studies have provided supportive evidence about the relevance of the Competence-Based-Communication view (e.g. Borghini and Rinallo 2003). As reference communication can be perceived as a one form of competence-based-communication, it is important to study how the supplier's competence can be effectively communicated through different types of customer references.

Building a Conceptual Framework for the Empirical Study

In the following section, a conceptual framework for the empirical study is built. First, the process model of reference utilization is introduced in order to clarify the actors and relationships involved in the referencing process. After that, the first dimension of the conceptual framework is developed based on the relationship development literature (e.g. Ford 1980; Ford 1982; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987) The second dimension is derived from the results of a study, which examined reference communication in company Web sites (Jalkala and Salminen 2006).

The Reference Communication Process

The referencing process (Figure 1) can be presented as a four-stage process that includes three actors: the supplier, the existing customer (who is acting as a reference), and the potential customer, who is the target of reference communication. Accordingly, three dyadic relationships can be differentiated: supplier – existing customer, supplier – potential customer and existing – potential customer. *At phase 1*, the supplier creates the preconditions for potential reference utilization by maintaining and nurturing its current customer relationships with existing customers so that they are willing to act as references. *At phase 2*, the chosen references are communicated to the potential customer. The purpose is to increase the chances of a new customer relationship by influencing positively on the perceived competence, credibility, and reputation of the supplier, and thus, to reduce the perceived risk of the potential customer. *At phase 3*, the supplier can try to influence the comparison standards of the potential buyer, and finally, *at phase 4*, the effects of the referencing process are examined. In a positive case, a new customer relationship will be established and the new customer will be targeted to phase 1 activities, so that it may become a reference customer. (Salminen and Möller 2006, p. 37) In the present study, the focus is at the phase activities 2, which can be labeled as the marketing communication phase, during which the supplier is signaling references to potential customers. The focus is on studying how the development phase during the “later stages of the relationship” between the supplier and the existing customer affects the reference communication situation at the phase 2.

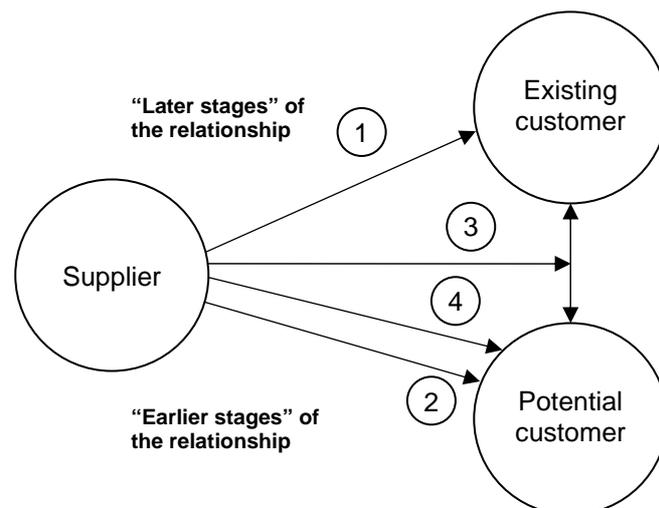


Figure 1. The Process Model of Reference Utilization (adapted from Salminen and Möller 2006, 33)

Dynamic Nature of Reference Relationships

Olkkonen, Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi (2000, 405) have emphasized that relational issues cannot be separated from communicational episodes, and the development of buyer-seller relationships inevitably is affected and affects the communication between the parties. Accordingly, also in reference utilization, the development phase of the buyer-seller relationship affects the utilization and communication of the reference. A good relationship between the supplier and the customer is a prerequisite when the supplier wants to utilize the relationship as a reference, especially when the reference customer is actively involved in the referencing process (Ford 1984, p. 70; Cunningham and Culligan 1990, p. 521). This usually requires a mutually satisfying business relationship based on trust and commitment. A good reference relationship is such that the value of that relationship can be communicated to potential customer so that the potential customer is able to evaluate the benefits and costs involved in that relationship (Salminen and Möller 2006, p. 14)

The idea of integrating relationship development and marketing communication has been adopted by Andersen, (2001) who has developed a model, which integrates the development of marketing relationships with marketing communication practices, and explains the use of different marketing communication practices at different stages of relationship development. The idea of linking relationship development to marketing communication is adopted also here, but from a different perspective. In the present study, the idea is to classify different reference communication situations according to the development phase of the reference relationship, and examine how customer relationships can be communicated as references at different stages of their life-cycle.

There are several models describing the relationship development in buyer-seller relationships (e.g. Ford 1980; Wilson and Mummalaneni 1986; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987). For the purposes of the present study, the model developed by Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) was found to be most useful for classifying different stages of the reference relationship. Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) take the social exchange approach to relationship development and draw strongly on the work of social psychologist. The social exchange theory can be helpful in trying to understand the complex process of referencing, where social relationships and individual actors often act in a significant role. According to Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987, p. 15) relationships evolve through five general phases: 1) awareness, 2) exploration, 3) expansion, 4) commitment, and 5) dissolution. The awareness phase is the earliest phase in relationship development, during which interaction between the parties has not occurred (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987, p. 15). When a customer relationship is utilized as a reference, the relationship can be assumed to be in the "later stages" of the relationship development, where the deal is closed and the customer relationship has been established (Salminen 1997, p. 189). Therefore, the awareness phase is excluded from the conceptual framework, as the relationship used as a reference should be in later stages of relationship development. The exploration phase is the first phase to be included in the conceptual framework, as it refers to the search and trial phase in relational exchange, and can be considered as the earliest phase of reference utilization. The expansion phase is characterized by continuing increase in benefits obtained by the exchange partners as well as their increasing interdependence (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987, p. 18). According to Ford (1980) this 'development' phase is also characterized by increasing experience of the two partners. The commitment phase refers to a phase where the exchange partners have achieved a level of satisfaction from the exchange process, and the final dissolution phase represents a situation where the reference is a 'previous' customer relationship.

Goals of Reference Communication

The second dimension for the conceptual framework is based on the results of a previous study, which examined reference communication on three Finnish ICT-companies' Web sites (Jalkala and Salminen 2006). The study identified three major discourses and orientations that companies use in their reference descriptions: 1) Discourse of Benefits, 2) Discourse of Commitment and 3) Discourse of Technological Expertise. The findings suggest that references can be communicated with different orientations depending on the specific needs of the supplier and the nature of the reference relationship. For example, when the primary target of reference utilization is to increase sales, the company's main goal of reference communication is to communicate the value of its offerings and to emphasize the benefits that its solution has brought to the reference customers. On the other hand, companies seeking to establish partnerships can emphasize their partnership ability by focusing on describing their partnership-type references. The third goal of reference communication is to

demonstrate the company's technological competence and transfer ability. Thus, through reference communication, supplier's present themselves as providers of business benefits, as close and committed partners or as technological experts. These discourses may overlap and some of them may appear more strongly in certain companies' descriptions.

Table 1 depicts the dimensions of the conceptual framework for the empirical study, which is built by combining the dimension of relationship development and the suggested alternative goals of reference communication. The developed framework is related to the life-cycle construct of a reference delivery (Salminen 1997, p. 287), which focuses on examining the development of an individual reference delivery. However, in our model, the focus is on the relationship between the supplier and the reference customer.

Table1. Proposed Dimensions of the Conceptual Framework

Reference Communication Goal-based Dimensions		Relationship Development-based Dimensions	
1)	Communicating benefits of the supplier's solution	1)	Exploration
2)	Communicating supplier's partnership ability	2)	Expansion
3)	Communicating supplier's expertise	3)	Commitment
		4)	Dissolution

The Pilot Case Study

Data and Methodology

The pilot case company is a Finnish IT company that provides solutions for customers in several industry areas. With over 15 000 employees, the company is one of the largest IT service providers in Europe. The data has been collected through a semi-structured interview with the company's marketing manager and from company reports and internal documents. The following section briefly introduces the background and context of the case company's reference communication as well as analysis regarding the company's reference communication situations at different phases of the reference relationship. Based on the conceptual framework and analysis of the research data, a taxonomy classifying the different reference communication situations is proposed. However, as the study is at an early stage, and the present paper only introduces preliminary findings from the pilot case study, the results should be viewed as grouped observations and initial findings.

Case Company's Background of Reference Utilization

The need for references has become especially high for companies operating in fields characterized by high technological uncertainty, such as the ICT field. In parallel with this trend, the case company aims to utilize its customer relationships as references as much as possible. The company has a track record including over 100 reference descriptions in the form of 'success stories' and 'top stories' on its Web site. Additionally, the company utilizes its customer references in customer-meeting events, where the company's reference customers tell about concluded and on-going projects to potential customers.

The main goal of reference communication is to demonstrate the benefits that the company is able to bring to its customer's operations. The company has chosen to operate on business areas where it has the deepest industry expertise. Thus, in addition to the three main reference communication goals, the company also wants to emphasize its industry expertise and familiarity with customer's business through its references.

The company has divided its customers into two groups: 'partnership-type customers' and 'solution customers'. The dynamic nature and the development of the customer relationship used as reference is most evident in the partnership-type relationships that can also be considered as key-accounts and most important reference customers for the case company.

Analysis of Case Company's Reference Communication at Different Phases of Reference Relationship Development

Exploration Phase: Expectations-based Reference Communication:

When a new customer relationship emerges, the company immediately utilizes, if possible, the name of the new customer as a reference through press releases and company's Web site, even though the actual project has not even started yet. At this point, the communication is largely based on the expected benefits of the project and on the possible future partnership that the companies aim at.

Expansion Phase: First-experience-based reference communication:

As soon as the customer relationship moves to the expansion phase, and the project reaches a point where there are some preliminary results to show, the reference case will be updated. As the relationship develops and there are more results and realized benefits to show, the reference communication shifts to focusing on telling about the first realized and concrete benefits that the reference customer has gained from the case company's solution. Thus, at this point, the reference communication is largely based on the first experiences that the reference customer has about the supplier's performance.

Commitment Phase: Evidence-based reference communication:

Concurrently, as the relationship deepens and reaches the commitment-phase, the customer is usually most willing to recommend and act as reference. At this point, the customer itself may benefit from acting as a reference by enhancing its own image as an innovative adopter and IT modernizator. The investments made to the relationship may be at this point very large and therefore the customer is more than willing to tell about the adopted new IT system. The interview data indicates that at this point, the referencing process is most likely a 'win-win situation' for both parties. However, with some of the customers, the competitive situation and the significance of new investments may result that the customer is not willing to act as a reference in order to protect the critical information from competitors.

Dissolution Phase: Past-experience-based reference communication:

As the relationship develops further or even dissolves for some reason, there are no more projects and the reference utilization shifts back to the passive phase. If there are no new transactions between the case company and the reference customer, the customer may become only a name on the supplier's reference list. At this point, the reputable name of the reference customer comes important, as there are no recent deliveries or projects to communicate as the relationship has dissolved. By using the names of large and reputable customers as references in e.g. reference lists, the case company aims to communicate its expertise and competence as a supplier, who is valued by leading companies.

Based on the conceptual framework and analysis of the pilot case data, a preliminary taxonomy of reference communication is proposed. Figure 2 summarizes the findings from the pilot case study and depicts a proposed taxonomy of reference utilization. In the proposed taxonomy, the reference communication process is divided into four categories according the developmental phase of the reference relationship. For each phase, a description of how the goals of reference communication can be reached in this particular situation is introduced.

		Phase of the customer relationship			
		Exploration	Expansion	Commitment	Dissolution
		1) <i>Expectations-based reference communication</i>	2) <i>First-experience-based reference communication</i>	3) <i>Evidence-based reference communication</i>	4) <i>Past performance-based reference communication</i>
Goal of reference communication	Communicating benefits of the supplier's solution	No deliveries to show, communication based on expected future benefits	First deliveries conducted and first realized benefits to show	Many realized benefits to demonstrate, customer is often willing to give testimonials and act as a reference	No new deliveries to show, communication based on previous deliveries
	Communicating supplier's partnership ability	No long-term relationship yet to demonstrate	No long-term relationship yet to demonstrate, communication based on planned partnership	Communicating the commitment and long-term nature of the relationship is easy	Partnership difficult to demonstrate due to the dissolved relationship
	Communicating supplier's expertise	No realized evidence of the supplier's expertise - Using the reputable name of the customer as reference	Communicating supplier's expertise based on the customer's first experiences	Customer is most likely benefiting from acting as a reference and willing to communicate its experiences about the supplier's expertise	Using the reputable name of the customer as a reference

Figure 2. Proposed Taxonomy of Reference Communication

Conclusions

Based on the conceptual framework and preliminary findings from the pilot case study, a taxonomy for classifying different reference communication situations was proposed. Depending on the relationship development phase, four different situations of reference utilization can be identified and the reference communication situation seems to differ also depending on the goal of reference communication. Classifying the different referencing situations can help in gaining a deeper understanding of how different types of customer relationships can be used and communicated as references. The results of the pilot case study have shown that the reference communication is different depending on the development phase of the reference relationships. In the following phase of the study, the additional case studies will be conducted and the empirical cases will be analyzed both individually and by using cross-case analysis as an analytic method. In the following phase, the unit of analysis within the case companies is the dyadic relationship between the reference customer and the supplier. The purpose is to examine several relationships at different development stages in order to deepen the understanding of how reference communication is influenced by relationship development. With help of the following case studies, the proposed taxonomy will be developed further. The results from the pilot case study have shown that the referencing situation changes as the relationship between the supplier and the reference customer develops. Accordingly, the reference communication strategies have to be adapted depending on the developmental phase of the utilized customer relationship.

Ritter has proposed that a particular skill, network competence, allows companies to handle, use and exploit single relationships and whole networks (Ritter 1999). Effective utilization and communication of references can be seen as one example of network competence, as the utilization of reference relationships has a positive impact to a company's network position. Also, communicating references makes the company's network of existing customers visible to potential customers and thus, 'opens up' the network. The concept of network identity refers to the perceived attractiveness of a firm as an exchange partner according to its set of connected relationships with other firms. (Anderson,

Håkansson and Johanson 1994, p. 4) In order for a company to succeed in a highly networked economy, a firm's ability to manage and utilize its relationships is of central importance (Ritter and Gemünden 2003). In order to develop the network identity, effective utilization and communication of references is essential. Therefore, exploring the ways in which customer relationships at different phases of their life cycle can be used as references increases the understanding of reference utilization and contributes to the relationship and network approach.

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