

The Concept of Offering in Project Marketing – A Literature Review

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Abstract

The concept of offering has received only limited research interest in different fields of marketing research and the concept seems to lack clarification especially in the field of project marketing. The increasing importance of projects and project operations brings forward a need to examine and clarify the role of offering in the project marketing context. The unique characteristics of project business set challenges for building project offerings, and these characteristics should be considered when building a definition for the concept of offering in project marketing context. Offering as a concept has a variety of conceptualizations in different fields of marketing, and these definitions are quite divergent when compared to each other. The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of an offering in different schools of marketing thought and to discuss the relevant elements of the offering for project marketing purposes with a special emphasis on project-related services. The study is conducted as a literature review of selected meta-theoretical profiles of marketing schools in order to gather and analyze the different definitions for the concept of offering. Based on the literature review, a collection of relevant offering elements in project marketing context is proposed. Also, the role of selected offering elements in project business is discussed. It seems that services have a distinctive role in the project marketing offering, and that the service elements can have several roles in building the offering. Project business is an evolving area from theoretical as well as managerial point of view, and the concepts of project marketing need more research attention and clarification. The present study contributes to the project marketing research by examining the concept of offering in the project marketing context and by discussing the role of project-related services in project offerings.

Keywords: offering, project-related services, project marketing, industrial marketing

Introduction

Background

Project operations are currently one of the dominating modes in international business (e.g. Hadjikhani 1996; Skaates and Cova 2004). Suppliers are supplying industrial turnkey projects, which cover everything from the creation of a need to the taking care of the final demolition of, for example, a paper machine. There has also been an ongoing phenomenon of moving towards services oriented dominant logic in marketing (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Moreover, the role of services in offering has expanded (e.g. Grönroos 1987; Stremersch, Wuyts and Frambach 2001). When also project-related

services are an emerging area of research interest (Skaates and Cova 2004), it can be seen that studying the connections between offering and project-related services is relevant.

As the world is facing globalization, the competition between international business players is toughening. Companies must develop their offerings to exceed their customer's expectations and deliver either greater value or lower costs as their competitors do. This is mainly done by differentiating services, which are an important source of generated value (Anderson and Narus 1995). However, offering, which can be seen as the physical mode of supplier's value proposition (Kotler 2003, p. 11), is approached quite differently among authors (Wikner and Andersson 2004), but still lacks theoretical attention (Penttinen and Rajala 2004). Furthermore, there seems to be no clear definition for the concept of offering in the project literature.

Purpose of the study

Project business is indeed an evolving area from theoretical as well as from managerial point of view (Arto and Wikström 2005, p. 351). Furthermore project marketing has some unique features that distinguish it from traditional business marketing: 1) the discontinuity of demand for projects, 2) the uniqueness of each project, and 3) the complexity of each individual project due to the number of actors involved (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, p. 13). Because of these D-U-C features, and the claim that project marketing has a lot to do with cultural factors especially when dealing with project-related services (Skaates and Cova 2004), the suggested method of linking different approaches together by Skaates and Cova (ibid) could be an appropriate way to approach this research problem. They have used a classification of meta-theoretical profiles of marketing schools to evaluate the relevance of different marketing schools in project-related services research. Their classification is used as the base for the literature review.

Among different authors, the definitions of a project (see e.g. Cova, Ghauri, and Salle 2002) seem quite similar with the definitions of offering (see e.g. Anderson and Narus 1999). Also when exploring the relatively new project marketing literature it can be seen, that some of the same concepts and phenomena have been used with different names. It also seems that the term of offering in project marketing has a variety of meanings. One reason for this might be the translations from multiple languages – English is not the dominating language in project marketing studies (Skaates and Cova 2004). The terms offering, offer, and project are also intertwined. These terms are used in some studies as synonyms for each other. For example the term project is used as a synonym for offering (Ahmed 1993, p. 45). Another example is the alternating use of offering and offer: Cova, Mazet and Salle (1994) used "offering", while in Cova, Ghauri and Salle (2002) had replaced it with "offer" in the same context

This indicates that clarification of even the central concepts in project marketing literature would be an important task in project marketing research. This paper contributes to this challenge by clarifying the concept of offering. The present study explores different views of offering and then analyzes their relevance in the project marketing context – emphasizing the role of services. Finally, a collection of relevant elements in a project marketing offering is proposed. This study increases the knowledge of project marketing and contributes especially the research of project-related services.

The purpose of the present study is the following: it identifies the special characteristics of offering in project marketing by conducting a literature review categorized by the suggested method of Skaates and Cova (2004). Consequently, the research questions are as follows:

1. How is the concept of offering understood in the following meta-theoretical profiles of marketing schools?
 - i. Transaction perspective
 - ii. Services Marketing
 - iii. IMP Group
 - iv. Project Marketing
2. Which elements would be appropriate to include in the concept of project marketing offering and what is their role in it?

Methodology

The research method of the present study is a literature review. First research question is answered by conducting a structural and conceptual analysis of the different definitions of offering. In this analysis different concepts for offering are studied and the differences are then identified in these four profiles.

The second research question deals with clarifying the concept of offering in the project marketing context. It is answered by examining systematically the possible appropriate elements to be included in the concept of project marketing offering. This requires exploring the available project marketing literature to identify its characteristics, thus enabling the finding of the most relevant elements from the different offering concepts for the project marketing offering context. These elements are analyzed by unfolding their role in a project marketing offering. Finally, the elements with their characteristics are tabulated for further analysis.

To identify different definitions for the concept of offering academic studies such as journal articles published in recognized journals and conferences are reviewed. Research papers and relevant doctoral dissertations are also reviewed. The reference lists from some seminal articles about project marketing (see e.g. Cova, Mazet, and Salle 1994) are used to obtain a wider set of references. Concepts like systems selling and bidding might have been neglected if not found in those reference lists. The broad database of papers presented in IMP conferences are also used especially when analyzing the concept of offering in the profile, IMP Group but also when searching for general project marketing studies.

Focus

The choice of keywords is a relevant issue to deal with when making literature reviews. There are many related concepts for offering available in the literature. These are for example the concepts of product and the concepts of customer value proposition. In this paper, however, these other concepts are not systematically explored – the paper concentrates on the concept of offering only. This is to avoid possible confusions; for example Penttinen and Rajala (2004) consider offering as a value proposition but according to Anderson, Narus and van Rossum (2006) customer value proposition describes all the benefits which offering might deliver to target customers – and thus it is not the offering itself.

The following definitions for project and project business are used in the present study. Project is considered as “a complex transaction covering a package of products, services and work, specifically designed to create capital assets that produce benefits for a buyer over an extended period of time” (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, p. 3). Project business on the other hand is “the part of business that relates directly or indirectly to projects, with a purpose to achieve objectives of a firm or several firms” Artto and Wikström (2005, p. 351).

Definitions of offering

There are several differences among the definitions of offering and that some of them are more relevant than others for the context of the present study. In the present study, these different definitions are gathered under the selected four profiles. In the following sub-chapter, each profile is introduced briefly.

Meta-Theoretical Profiles of Marketing Schools

The study uses four meta-theoretical profiles of marketing schools (for now on abbreviated as profiles) in which to analyze the concept of offering to gain a more holistic view of a project marketing offering. These profiles are Transaction Perspective also known as Marketing Mix Approach, Services Marketing, IMP (Industrial Marketing and Purchasing) Group, and Project Marketing. Skaates and Cova (2004) have built the profiles by comparing different schools of marketing using the following attributes: “Basic goals”, “Key questions asked”, “Ontological assumptions”, “Level/unit of analysis”, and “Inspiration from other research communities” in order to gain deeper consensus about the issue of marketing project-related services.

According to Skaates and Cova (2004) the Transaction Perspective is the least relevant approach from these four for the research of complex project-related services. They see that the Transaction Perspective provides a general theory of marketing with optimal marketing mixes and one-sided communication, but lacks the ability to explain complexity and interdependencies. However, when studying literature related to offering it seems that Transaction Perspective approach is the most used one, making the presence of Transaction Perspective in this study justified. The presence of IMP Group's approach can be argued by its strong influence in the buying-process phases of the project (Skaates and Cova 2004), though the discontinuity of projects is in contradiction with the long-term relationship theme. Within the IMP Group of researchers the concept of offering has been discussed e.g. in Ford et al. (2002). However, in the field of IMP related research, studies focusing mainly on the concept of offering do not seem to exist.

The Service Marketing profile on its behalf takes the research deeply inside services, which the Project Marketing profile has not done yet. This is why its presence in this study is highly relevant. However, the service marketing perspective has only few active authors who have contributed on the offering discussion. Christian Grönroos (e.g. 1987; 2000) has had an active role and this is why his works have been studied thoroughly when making this paper. When Service Marketing profile is a relevant discipline especially in the level of single projects, the Project Marketing profile contributes deeper multiple projects with long-term relationships. However as mentioned earlier, there is an absence of clear definitions for offering in the project marketing context. On the other hand this shows that there is a research gap and the present study is worth of doing.

Different definitions for the concept of offering

In this literature review, a collection of definitions for offering have been studied – for example from the Transaction Perspective, the definitions of Kotler (2003), Kaplan and Norton (2000), and Anderson and Narus (1999). Grönroos (2000) has studied offering in the Service Marketing, while Ford et al. (2002) have focused on the offering in the IMP context. In the Project Marketing profile, the seminal work has been done by e.g. Cova, Ghauri, and Salle (2002), but the views are still quite scattered. All these different definitions for offering have been summarized and categorized according to these profiles (Table 1). Each of these profiles are discussed in the following subchapters.

Transaction Perspective

As it can be seen, a majority of the found definitions can be classified to the Transaction Perspective category. All these definitions are based on the product/service foundation. However products are no longer kept as the main element of offering. There has been a change from product offering to market offering, which better describes the situation where the value of product has been diminished and the value of services has grown (Andersson and Narus 1999).

According to Anderson and Narus (1999, p. 6), "Value is what a customer firm gets in exchange for the price it pays. Therefore, we conceptually view a market offering as having two elemental characteristics: value and price." The existence of value or price in the offering definitions is two-folded. Some authors think value as a central part of offering concept, while others might consider it as a consequence of delivering the offering. According to Kaplan and Norton (2000), offering can be called as customer value proposition. It includes product/service attributes (price, time, quality, selection), relationship, and image elements. They offer three different compositions of these elements as following strategies; companies can rely on operational excellence, they can offer customer intimacy, or they can trust on product leadership. Value or price in the transaction perspective category is mentioned also by Kotler (2003) and Hedman and Kalling (2002). From these, Hedman and Kalling (2002) have quite simple definition containing only price/value factor besides product/service component.

Offering, a physical mode of company's value proposition for a customer, can be a combination of products, services, information, and experiences (Kotler 2003, p. 11). In service marketing, Kotler (ibid, p. 453) distinguishes two elements in offering: primary services package, for fulfilling customer's expectations, but also secondary service features, which add extra to the offering. Unlike Ford et al. (2002), Kotler does not include delivery in offering, but he emphasizes clearly the importance of services in offering concept. Normann & Ramirez (1993) have included the risk aspect in their offering;

risk sharing and taking is an element which no other author has included in their offering concepts. Their concept includes the following five elements: goods, services, risk sharing and risk taking, access to or use of systems or infrastructure, and information. The product and the service elements are completed by the price/cost element in the offering concept by Hedman and Kalling (2002). Amit and Zott (2001) use the combination of goods/services, information, resources, capabilities as their offering concept. These have in common the context of e-business or IT-industry. Some authors also think that offering is a substantial part of a business model in IT-related business (Hedman and Kalling 2002; Morris, Schindehutte and Allen 2005).

Table 1. Different Definitions for offering Concept

Profile	Elements of Offering	Special features and context	Author(s)
Transaction perspective	Products, services, information, and experiences	Value proposition. Primary services package, for fulfilling customer's expectations, but also secondary service features	Kotler 2003
	Product/service attributes, relationship, and image	Customer value proposition. Companies can either rely on operational excellence, they can offer customer intimacy, or they can trust on product leadership	Kaplan and Norton 2000
	Product, services, programs, or systems	Market offering. To add value or reduce cost	Anderson and Narus 1999
	Goods, services, risk sharing and risk taking, access to or use of systems or infrastructure, and information	Risk aspects	Normann & Ramirez 1993
	Product, service, price/cost	E-business	Hedman and Kalling 2002
	Goods/services, information, resources, capabilities	E-business	Amit and Zott 2001
Services Marketing	Core, facilitating, supporting services surrounded by the service concept, accessibility of the service, interactions, and consumer participations	Augmented service offering (ASO), the role of technology	Grönroos 1987, 2000
IMP Group	Advice, product, service, logistics, adaptation	First advice, then the product-service-logistics combination, and last is adaptation	Ford et al. 2002
	Product quality, salesperson, service and price	Partnering	MacKenzie and Hardy 1996
	Product, services, price vs. benefits and sacrifices	Integrated solutions	Wikner and Andersson 2004
Project Marketing	Technical components, service elements, and financial components plus specifications and flexibility	Definition of project offer (p. 71)	Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002

Services Marketing

Offering in the Services Marketing discipline seems not to have received plenty of interest. One of the found authors studying offering concept in Service Marketing is Christian Grönroos (1987; 2000). In his concept of offering the services are the main content. Grönroos (2000) divides service offering into following four categories: the service concept, a basic service package, an augmented service offering (ASO) and finally managing image and communication. While the first step, the service concept, only determines the intentions of a company, the second state fills up the customers' needs. However, this alone does not guarantee the success of a deal and so an augmented service offering has to be developed – the firm has to manage its image and communications so that the customer gets the final satisfaction from a certain deal (Grönroos 2000). According to Grönroos (ibid), the basic service package includes core, facilitating, supporting services and is surrounded by accessibility of the service, interactions, and consumer participations.

IMP Group

Ford et al. (2002, p. 122) see the offering as a promise for the customer. They divide it in the following five elements: advice, product, service, logistics, and adaptation. It is also mentioned, that services can play a significant role in the offering. According to Ford et al. (ibid), the product itself without added services brings only little value for a customer – customers are looking for services unlike plain products and are, also, willing to pay for external, outsourced skills. Though the offering developed by Ford et al. (ibid) might seem simple at first, due the increased complexity, specialization and interactions in the business in general, also the offerings have become more complex (Ford and Håkansson 2006). When focusing on long-term relationships and especially partnering, the elements of offering can be the following: product quality, salesperson, service and price (MacKenzie and Hardy 1996). Furthermore in the context of integrated solutions, the following elements have been included: product, services, price vs. benefits and sacrifices (Wikner and Andersson 2004).

Project Marketing

Cova, Ghauri and Salle (2002) speak about offers, not offerings. Offer in project marketing is something beyond normal offers, which are consisted of technical components, service elements, and financial components (ibid, quite close to the offering concept of Hedman and Kalling 2002). According to Cova Ghauri, and Salle (2002) the offer should contain as wide definitions as possible for all the technical and financial details for a certain project. Project offer has to also have certain flexibility in order to fit in the project milieu. They prefer to use a term *global offer* to describe the international and complex characteristics of the project business. Here is space for misunderstanding; do Cova, Ghauri, and Salle (ibid) consider projects as a synonym for offerings – why are they not using the term offering instead? These terms should be used more consistently to avoid possible misconceptions.

Proposed Project Marketing Offering Elements

The review of different offering concepts shows that the concept of offering has a variety of different conceptualizations depending on authors and disciplines. Here, it is suggested that by presenting a set of building blocks for project marketing offering and arguing their relevance in the project marketing field, there might be room for a comprehensive view for project marketing offering. This paper now presents a collection of possible elements to be included in the project marketing offering on the basis of relevant literature. These elements are categorized into the following sub-categories: Physical, Service, Value, Milieu, and Offering Strategy elements.

Physical Elements

Products are the physical elements of the offering. According to Ford et al. (2002), “product itself has no intrinsic value”, it is only a solution for a problem. Thus products are not the most important element of the offering. In the proposed offering concept, products are called as the core idea – in industrial investment goods this could be for example a paper machine.

Service Elements

Services have a major role in the present business-to-business offering (e.g. Grönroos 1987; Stremersch, Wuyts and Frambach 2001; Ford et al. 2002), but what are these services? There has been many studies trying to classify services, but “classification of industrial services has not received the same level of attention as has the categorization of consumer services” (Boyt and Harvey 1997, p.294). However there is one quite recent classification of services relating to project marketing, which is used in this study. Cova, Dontenwill and Salle (2000) have built on Mathieu (1999) when suggesting the following categorization of services relating to the project marketing (Table 2). Skaates and Cova (2004) complement this categorization by arguing that while SSP are usually an integral part of the offering, SSC1, SSC2, and SSN services are more easily separable from the physical project offering.

Table 2. Service Categorization in Project Marketing (Cova, Dontenwill and Salle 2000)

Abbreviation	Definition
SSP	Services supporting the physical offering (e.g. installation)
SSC1	Services supporting the client's action in relation to the physical offering (e.g. employee training)
SSC2	Services supporting the client's action with a less direct relation to the supplier's immediate order (e.g. general advice about the energy efficiency)
SSN	Services supporting the client's action in the client's network of relationships to other actors (e.g. entering to a dialogue with the client's business partners)

Value Elements

Suppliers must understand the logic in value creation and delivery to the customer (Ulaga 2003). Thus it does not come as a surprise that value is a relevant topic when exploring the concept of offering – many of the authors mentioned above have included some kind of financial aspects into their offering concepts. These include e.g. Cova, Ghauri and Salle (2002) who have added financial flows as a part of the project offering. A reason for this can be found in the nature of project business. Besides the D-U-C factors, there is also a fourth special characteristic in project marketing: financial commitment (ibid, p.13). Cova, Ghauri and Salle (ibid) present that though the financial issues are extensive in the long-term industrial markets, in project business the costs are centered on a single project thus making it a central issue in negotiations.

But value is much more than only the financial issues. Customers, for example, are interested in how reliable the result is going to be – for example in the process industries, customers usually demands a set of different test periods even before the actual guarantee period starts. When the financial issues are important, the possible risks are a topic which usually arises. From the gathered offering concepts, only Normann & Ramirez (1993) have taken risk sharing and risk taking as a part of offering. Furthermore, risks are “inherent to any offering” with emphasize on project business (Normann 2001). Thus the management of risks is essential in project business and needs to be involved in the proposed offering.

Milieu Elements

The milieu in project marketing is a collective of the relevant business and non-business actors and it is characterized by 1) a network of actors, 2) a representation constructed and shared by these actors, and 3) a set of rules and norms regulating the interactions between these actors (Cova, Mazet and Salle 1996, p. 645). The milieu is heavily involved in the project business (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002). It has been also recognized that managing business relationships and networks, both at the level of the individual project as well as at the level of multiple projects is essential to project marketing success, and to acquisition of subsequent projects. (Skaates, Tikkanen and Lindblom 2002, p. 401). Relationships between actors in the buying and selling firms are important before, during, and after the project delivery (Hadjikhani 1996, p. 319). These issues mean that there must be ongoing strong interaction between various actors involved in the certain project. Because of the complex milieu, the whole offering must also be flexible between and also during projects. Thus flexibility is a part of the proposed concept.

Offering Strategy Elements

Overcoming discontinuity in project marketing is a major strategic problem (Hadjikhani 1996). Because of the discontinuity of demand, project marketers have to maintain both sleeping and potential relationships between the individual projects (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, p. 20). During such times companies must have strategies for reacting effectively to the project opportunities (Cova and Hoskins 1997). Cova and Hoskins present two possible approaches for companies to overcome the discontinuity: deterministic and constructivist approach, which can also be combined if necessary. In deterministic approach, the company is anticipating the milieu, while in constructivist approach the company is actively involved in shaping the milieu. Skaates and Tikkanen (2003) have built on Bonaccorsi, Pammolli and Tani (1996) and added a possible control approach – an extreme version of the constructivist approach – in which the company controls the whole milieu. Furthermore, they call

these approaches as postures, a term which is used also in this paper. These three postures are the basis of the company's strategic options in the formulation of project marketing offering.

Creative offering means offering in the constructivist approach (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, p.42) but can be adapted also in the control posture. This creative offering means that there is no fixed offering, but these project companies have to be able to build their offerings according to situation at hand. The following Table 3 summarizes the elements proposed to be included in the concept of a project marketing offering, or the parts from which a creative offering can be built. This is a tentative proposition and thus must be seen as a starting point to further research.

Table 3. Proposed Elements in Offering

Category	Element	Role in offering
Physical elements	Core	Acts as a base for business, the traditional core of the offering (e.g. a paper machine)
	Specifications	Acts as a blueprint for a project
Service elements	SSP	Supports the core "product"
	SSC1	Supports client's actions relating to the core
	SSC2	Supports client's actions with no direct link to the core
	SSN	Supports client's network
Value elements	Financial elements	In the tender phase
	Risk management	Controls the uncertainty factor
Milieu elements	Flexibility	Controls the uniqueness and complexity factor
	Interaction	Controls the uniqueness and complexity factor
Offering Strategy elements (postures)	Deterministic	In case of readily built tender – "anticipating"
	Constructivist	If the tender is jointly formulated with customer – "involving"
	Control	When the supplier controls the tender formulation – "controlling"

Conclusions and Discussion

The concept of offering is widely used but seems to lack a proper definition, especially in the project marketing context. Also in the project marketing literature, the concepts of "offer", "offering" and "project" are occasionally used as synonyms. This creates a need for clarification of the offering concept in order to advance the project marketing research.

Based on the literature review, five categories of relevant offering elements in project marketing context were proposed, (1) Physical, (2) Service, (3) Value, (4) Milieu, and (5) Offering Strategy. Within these categories, possible offering elements and their role in project marketing were discussed. As a result, it seems that services have a distinctive role in the project marketing offering, and the service elements can have several roles in building the offering. Also the possibility of including the offering strategy in the conceptual definition of offering should be considered. Depending on the current situations in the milieu, different offering strategies must be used in order to create or adjust a demand for the offering.

As a conclusion to the discussion above, the most fundamental question considering the nature of offering still remains unsolved. Is offering only a physical mode of company's value proposition for a customer? Or should offering be considered more as a promise for the customer in the project marketing? Or furthermore, should the concept of offering include price – could an offering then be misunderstood as an offer? These questions are only a few examples and show that there are still many unanswered topics in the research of offering, especially in the project marketing context.

Concurrently, the increasing interest towards services oriented dominant logic in marketing research (Vargo and Lusch 2004) along with the new approaches to classify products and services (e.g. Lovelock and Gummesson 2004) bring forward also alternative views to approach the concept of offering – after all the project business is developing to more service-oriented direction. An alternative paradigm to distinguish marketing transactions based on ownership (ibid) might shape the traditional conceptualizations of offering and project marketing as a whole.

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