

The Buyer's Perspective of Different Marketing Practices

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Abstract

This paper introduces the literature review, research question and research overview for a program of research that has recently been initiated. Few empirical studies show the buyers' perspective of the different marketing practices implemented by suppliers. The research aims to investigate the value perception accorded by organizational buyers to suppliers' marketing practices. The research program will be based on a framework derived from work undertaken by Cannon and Perreault, (1999), complemented by a deeper analysis of organisational buyer behaviour literature.

Introduction

This paper summarizes the literature review for a current research project and presents the rationale for the research programme. These fields include relationship marketing, customer value and organizational buyer behaviour. It also features a summary of the papers consulted to identify the research gap and to build the research question. The sections in this paper have been organized in the following way: Relationship Marketing Evolution, Towards a More Pluralistic Approach, Buyer Value, Research Overview, References and Appendices.

Relationship Marketing Evolution

Although the term Relationship Marketing (RM) was formally introduced in academic literature by Berry in 1983, several associated ideas emerged much earlier. Initially, McGarry (1950 1951 1953 1958) described one of the main tasks of marketing as a contractual function with a relational focus on the development of cooperation and mutual interdependence among marketing actors. Later, two influential researchers in the 1960s and 1970s fuelled business-to-business RM thinking: first, Adler (1966) examined symbiotic relationships between firms, and, second, Arndt (1979) noted that firms tended to develop long-lasting relationships with their key customers and suppliers. Parvatiyar and Sheth (2000) confirmed that the impacts of these works spread across two continents -with different perspectives- in the 1980s.

In the United States, several scholars began emphasising buyer-seller relationships in organisational environments (Payne 2000) and examining long-term inter-organisational interactions as an intensification of transactional marketing. In Europe, two researcher groups viewed transactions as episodes within relationships. First, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group refined the conceptual framework for business relationships, leading to further elaboration of the business network notion (Håkansson and Snehota 2000). Second, the Nordic Group has expanded the concepts and frameworks of its services marketing school of thought to cross-business relationships (Grönroos 2000).

Although research on RM continued to develop over the 1980s, it was in the 1990s that RM reached its peak. This topic became very popular among both marketing scholars and practitioners as market changes gained speed, driven by continuous technological breakthroughs that resulted in increased competitive pressures (e.g., cost optimization, TQM, JIT, MRP, etc.), more demanding buyers, shorter product or service life cycles, globalization, uncertain macro economic conditions and more complex social environments (Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000; Webster 1992). Consequently, building and maintaining relationships became more important for organisations than customer acquisition (Payne 2000). Research output in the RM field increased significantly: several academic journals published special issues on this topic, and the American Marketing Association (AMA) used the term "relationships" on its new marketing definition (2005). Harker (1999) identified twenty six RM definitions. Appendix I shows a literature mapping for this field.

Towards A More Pluralistic Approach

The relational view of marketing has evolved from the efforts by several scholars to differentiate marketing practices by the nature of the customer served or product offered. Given this evolution, in the contemporary environment, RM discussion has been complicated by: (1) the variety of terms used to describe and define marketing; (2) the differing analysis units emphasised by each of the different research schools involved; and (3) the view that some marketing types are more appropriate to certain industries than others. To address these issues, Brodie and Coviello (Brodie, Coviello, Brookes and Little 1997, Coviello, Brodie, Danaher and Johnston 1992) developed an international research project which was undertaken in a dozen countries in North and South America, Europe, Asia and Australasia. This project, called the Contemporary Marketing Practice (CMP) Research Program, was launched in New Zealand in 1996 to profile marketing practice in a contemporary environment and to examine the relevance of relational marketing in different organisational, economic and cultural contexts.

As a result, a framework was developed (Coviello et al 1997; Brodie et al 1997) by systematically examining how previous researchers conceptualized marketing and more specifically RM. Special attention was given to the way the literature defined and used various terms associated with marketing. In addition, a number of informal interviews with marketing practitioners were used to refine the research. From this extensive review, the CMP research perspective was derived, identifying four aspects of marketing practice: (1) transaction marketing (managing the 4Ps to attract and satisfy customers); (2) database marketing (using technology-based tools to target and retain customers); (3) interaction marketing (developing interpersonal relationships between individual buyers and sellers), and (4) network marketing (positioning the firm in a connected set of cross-firm relationships).

Key findings from the CMP research could be grouped into five research questions (adapted from Pels 2005). First, are firms doing what the theory says -moving from a transactional approach to a relational approach? There is no clear indication of a shift. Results show the co-existence of transactional and relational marketing practices. Indeed, three clusters of firms have been catalogued: those with predominantly transactional or relational marketing practices and those pursuing a transactional/relational hybrid (Coviello et al 2002; Pels et al 2004). Second, are firms behaving similarly around the world? Companies throughout the world are using the combinations of Marketing Practices but with different degrees of intensity. There is a gap between countries in developed economies and emerging or transition economies (Pels et al 2004; Wagner 2005; Brady et al 2004). Third, are all types of firms behaving similarly? While business-to-consumer firms relate to their markets in a more transactional manner than business-to-business organisations, interaction and network marketing practices do not differ by firm type (Coviello et al 2001). Fourth, do external factors/contingent environments affect a company's marketing practice choices? Despite these theoretical trends, no sharp distinction has been found in marketing practice choices indicating a response to several factors, such as product or service markets served, either in consumer or business-to-business environments (Coviello et al 2002), or between unique or differentiated and generic offerings (Pels et al 2000), or among small, medium-sized and large companies (Coviello et al 2000), or as a result of specific, overall market conditions (Pels et al 2004). Lastly, do internal factors/environments affect a company's marketing practice choices? Although various studies have suggested that market orientation influences business performance, it does not seem to be an explanatory variable affecting marketing practice choices (Palmer et al 2005).

In this light, it seems safe to assume that the CMP researchers take a pluralistic view of marketing practice. The CMP Group has made a considerable contribution to RM literature. A number of scholars have undertaken a variety of studies to understand the complexity of these practices (Appendix I) from the seller's point of view. However, while sellers employ different practices to achieve greater effectiveness, so do buyers. Thus, organisational buying behaviour has changed its paradigm (Bunn 1993; Sheth 1996). Buyers clearly take an active role in seeking out suppliers and influencing interactions. Furthermore, it is important to understand that buyers seldom interpret sellers' offer proposition exactly as intended. More likely, buyers, based on their need structure, acknowledge and perceive certain offers, but not others. Similarly, sellers' offerings are based on their understanding of demands, as sellers only recognize or perceive certain buyers' needs (Pels et al 2000).

Buyer Value

For over a decade, the notion of value has been put forward as a critical variable in marketing. As a result of this increased attention, research and publications on this topic have grown significantly. However, there is still remarkably little agreement in the literature on what constitutes 'value', 'customer value' and 'organisational buyer value', or how any of these relate to relationship marketing. However, a review of the literature reveals that the definition of value embodies some fundamental lessons: value is multidisciplinary; value is customer-defined with the value-in-use notion; value is a trade-off; value is relative, and value is a multidimensional process.

First of all, the value concept is multifaceted and complicated by numerous interpretations, biases, and emphases. In addition to marketing-specific literature, this concept has been

applied to many settings in management, strategy, organisational behaviour, finance, accounting, operations, and information systems, as well as in psychology and social psychology. For example, the derivations of various value dimensions have been explored from the point of view of "strategic value" (Katz 1993), EVA (Stewart 1991), value chain (Porter 1985), continuous quality improvement initiatives (Richardson et al 1999), "intrinsic value" as created through scientific approaches to organization (Meredith et al. 1994), and, most particularly, "customers' desires change" (Flint et al 2002), "expected relationship value" (Hogan 2001), "the value of customers to an organization" (Blattberg et al 1996), and "the principles of customer perceived value" (Zeithaml 1988).

Traditionally, value has been used in the marketing literature to refer to 'the value of customers for a firm'. Only to some extent has "customer value" or the premise that "value is customer-defined" been discussed in literature –and only in transaction marketing contexts. In addition, current customer value research shows a clear trend away from a value-in-product-exchange notion towards a notion of value as being generated not by suppliers but by customers when using products or in co-creation with suppliers when interacting with them. According to this research, there is no value for customers until they can make use of a product. Thus, value is not what goes into goods and services; it is what customers get out of them. Since the early 1990s, this value-in-use notion (Woodruff et al 1996), as opposed to a value-in-exchange view, has prevailed in the marketing and management literature.

Customer-perceived value has been defined as the difference between the benefits and sacrifices perceived by customers in terms of their expectations -i.e., their needs and wants (Lapierre 2000). Customer sacrifices involve the overall monetary and non-monetary costs incurred by customers in order to complete a transaction or to maintain a relationship with a supplier. Non-monetary costs can be defined as the time, effort, energy, and conflict invested by customers to obtain products or services or to establish a relationship with a supplier. Sometimes these costs are purely psychological, caused by customers' feeling that they have lost control of the situation or cannot trust a supplier to deliver as agreed (Grönroos 2004).

Additionally, value considerations take place within some context. Even when no comparable market offering exists, there is always a competitive alternative. Simply put, customers' incentive to purchase a supplier's offering must exceed their incentive to pursue the next best alternative (Anderson et al 1999). Also, a competitive alternative may be for customers to decide to make the product themselves rather than purchasing it.

Next, many researchers acknowledge that buyers' decision-making processes consist of several stages. Although there is no general consensus on a specific theoretical model, cognitive, emotional and behavioural stages are widely recognised as featuring, for instance, awareness, knowledge, desires and intentions (Perugini et al 2004; Mele et al 1994), purchase, use or experience, and re-purchase. Furthermore, as a relationship is a process over time, customer value also emerges in a process over time (Grönroos 2004). Therefore, it may be said that value construction constitutes a continuum along decision-making steps. Accordingly, some scholars suggest two related definitions: customer desires and received value judgment (Flint et al 2002 1997; Bagozzi 1999). The former refers to what customers want to happen when interacting with a supplier and/or using the supplier's product or service, while the latter hinges on what a buyer perceives he has received from a vendor in a specific purchase or use situation.

Finally, a common myth argues that customers choose products or services purely based on superior technical characteristics and functions –i.e., their functional value. While this dimension of value is important, it is not the only one. Indeed, studies of business markets have concluded that intangible attributes such as reputation and image can be of equal or greater importance than tangible physical product attributes (Mudambi 2001; Shaw et al 1989). Although researchers do not seem to agree on the definition of the other buyer value dimensions, several do concede that there is more than one. The following table illustrates some of these views (Table 1).

Table 1 Buyer Value Dimensions

Author Type of benefit	Håkansson et al 2000	Morgan 2000	Liu et al 2005	Grönroos 2004	Aaker 1991	Anderson et al 1998	Bagozzi 1979
Functional dimension	Technical	Resources	Core and Support services	Episode	Functional	Technical and Service	Outcome-related
Psychology dimension	Social	Social		Relationship	Emotional and Self-expressive	Social	Experience-related
Economic dimension	Economic	Economic	Economic			Economic	Action-related

To conclude, these theoretical approaches require unique perspectives and demand a specific appreciation of the value concept(s) in question.

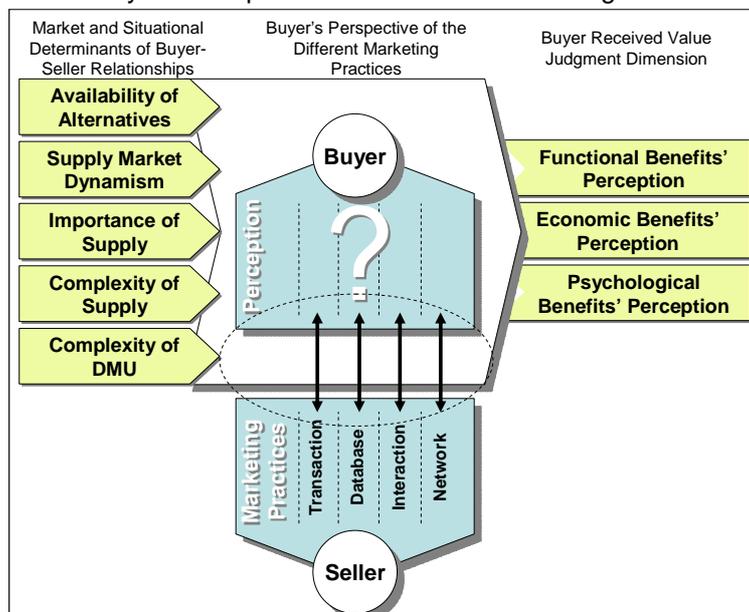
Research Overview

Considering this approach, it should be noted that few empirical studies show buyers' perspectives of the different marketing practices implemented by suppliers. Furthermore, there is no academic research on this topic in the Latin American region, where markets or countries are characterised, according to Hofstede (1980), as collectivist, having large power distance, and featuring strong uncertainty. For this reason, the purpose of this research will be to contribute to marketing literature by providing new insights to buyers' perspectives of supplier marketing practices in emerging markets in order to understand to what extent marketing practices reflect clients' preference for relationship or transactional marketing. Accordingly, the research question guiding this study is: *what is the value perception accorded by organizational buyers to suppliers' marketing practices?*

To provide a solution, a research program will be defined on the basis of the research undertaken by Cannon and Perreault, (1999), complemented by a deeper analysis of Organisational Buyer Behaviour literature to ensure an adequate selection of potential market and situational factors determining buyer-seller relationships.

Cannon and Perreault, (1999) have specified and measured six key underlying dimensions or connectors (information exchange, operational linkages, legal bonds, cooperation, and relationship-specific adaptations by buyers and sellers) that characterise the manner in which buyers and sellers relate and conduct relationships. Applying numerical taxonomy, the authors have detected eight different types of business relationships or clusters. In addition, this research has specified background market and purchase situations, showing their impacts when specific types of interactions are used. Also, it has proved that customer satisfaction and supplier performance evaluations vary across the different types of relationships (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Schematic overview of key constructs relevant to Buyers' Perspectives on Different Marketing Practices



Based on the fact that the desire to manage uncertainty and dependence are two motivators for buying firms to enter into closer relationships with their suppliers (Oliver 1990; Pfeffer et al 1978), two external, supply market characteristics and two internal situation factors for buying organizations have been found to underlie these drivers. The following factors affect the nature of buyer-seller relationships:

Availability of alternatives: This factor refers to market fragmentation –or, simply, the degree to which a buying firm has alternative sources of supply to meet a need. Traditional economic theory argues that, when many suppliers compete to sell comparable goods, the market becomes a ready source of information on prices and quality. However, a market featuring few suppliers or few alternative products often also lacks information on offerings. Thus, not having readily available alternative supply sources may cause uncertainty (Achrol et al 1998) and dependence for buying firms.

Supply market dynamism: This factor characterises the degree of variability of changes in a firm's supply market (Achrol et al 1998; Aldrich 1979). Such changes may be short-term variations or long-term shifts caused by factors such as rapidly changing technology, frequent price changes, or fluctuations in product availability. Significant supply market dynamism can create uncertainty and risk for a buying organization.

Supply importance: This factor relates to buying firms' perception of the financial and strategic significance of a particular supply or the impact of the purchase on their objectives. For example, in manufacturing operations, certain raw materials or components will be more critical to business success than routine maintenance and repair items or any other indirect material.

Supply complexity: Complex supply needs make it more difficult for a buying firm to evaluate purchase choices a priori or even to be certain about a supplier's performance ex post. In essence, greater supply complexity increases purchase decision ambiguity and risk. Thus, when supply needs are complex, a buying firm is likely to seek a relationship form that helps reduce ambiguity and risk.

These four market and situational factors consider with great amplitude and depth the variables that differentiate purchase profiles and relationship conditions. Nonetheless, these factors do not include an important situational variable: the complexity of decision making units (DMU).

According to organisational buyer behaviour literature buyers differ in many ways, including what they perceive to be important, the decision processes they follow, and the purchases they make. Well-established organisational buyer behaviour models highlight the importance of individual buyer (e.g., perceived risk), purchase (e.g., product attributes), environment (e.g., environmental uncertainty), organisational (e.g., size), decision process (e.g., B2C or B2B), and group (e.g., DMU) characteristics (Kauffman 1996). The first three characteristics are accounted for by the factors discussed earlier, while the following two have not been found to affect a company's choice of any marketing practices (Coviello et al 2001 2002) or, therefore, relationship type. Instead, no research has yet explored whether the group factor affects CMP choices or not. Thus, the DMU complexity factor will be added as another situational determinant for buyer-seller relationships.

Finally, since relationship forms reflect conscious choices or uncontrollable circumstances, buying-firm relationship evaluations may provide insights on structures preferred by buying organisations (Cannon et al 1999). The different dimensions of CMP buyer received value judgments may determine important outcomes in business exchanges.

To sum up, the result of this research may allow for the evaluation of marketing practices that create value for specific buyer or market segments in different market and organisational situations.

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Appendix I

Mapping of Relationship Marketing in Business-to-Business Literature

Decade	Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) and UK perspectives	American Perspectives	Nordic Perspectives	Contemporary Marketing Practices (CMP) Perspectives
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Extends the buyer-seller marketing relationships dyad to structures of complex nets involving three or more actors ✓ Transactions are an episode within a relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Buyer seller relationships and organizational environment ✓ Relationships are an intensification of transactional marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Introduction of services marketing concepts and models into buyer – seller interactions in B2B context ✓ Transactions are an episode within a relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CMP framework takes a pluralistic view of marketing practice ✓ Both transactional and relational marketing will coexist
50'		McGarry (1950,51,53) Contractual function of marketing		
60'		Alderson (1965) -Inter-intra channel cooperation-, Adler (1966) –Symbiotic relationship-		
70'	Håkansson et al (1975), Arndt (1979) –Key customer and supplier-	Wilson (1976), Bonoma et al (1977) –buyer-seller relationship-		
80'	Ford (1980), Jackson (1981), Håkansson (1982) –buyer-seller relationship-		Gummesson et al (1980) –Buyer-seller interaction-, Grönroos (1981, 83) – Interactive marketing services-	
		Berry (1983) First Relationship Marketing Definition		
	Johanson et al (1985), Thorelli (1986), Dwyer et al (1987), Turnbull (1987), Hallen et al (1989)	Jackson (1985), Varadarajan et al (1986), Shapiro (1988)	Lehtinen (1984), Grönroos et al (1985), Gummesson (1987)	
90'	Ford (1990), Hallen et al (1991), Christopher et al (1991), Håkansson et al (1995), Bagozzi (1995), Turnbull et al (1996), Araujo et al (1996), Ford (1997), Brennan et al (1998), Dubois (1998), Ford et al (1998), Juttner (1998), Ballantyne (1998)	Czepiel (1990), Anderson et al (1990, 91), Berry et al (1991), Stern et al (1992), Kotler (1992), Webster (1992), Sheth (1993), Morgan et al (1994), Hunt et al (1994), Bitner (1995), Wilson (1995), Weitz et al (1995), Berry (1995), Lusch et al (1996), Mitchell et al (1996), Doney et al (1997), Flint et al (1997), Cannon et al (1999)	Blomquist et al (1993), Gummesson (1993), Grönroos (1994, 96, 97), Holmlund (1996), Gummesson et al (1997)	Coviello et al (1997, 98), Brodie et al (1997), Pels (1999)
00'	Håkansson et al (2000), Payne (2000), Veloutsou et al (2002), Walsh et al (2004)	Day (2000), Griffith et al (2000), Parvatiyar et al (2000), Sheth (2000), Morgan (2000), Hewett (2002)	Grönroos (2000 2004), Gummesson (2004)	Lindgreen et al (2000), Pels et al (2000, 01), Coviello et al (2000, 01, 02), Brodie et al (2001), Palmer (2002), Brodie (2002), Pels et al (2003, 04), Brady et al (2002, 04), Lindgreen et al (2004), Palmer et al (2004, 05), Wagner (2005)
Despite the fact that academic scholars have not agreed on a definition and there are more than 26 Relationships Marketing definitions (Harker 1999), the American Marketing Association (AMA) published a new marketing definition including relationships in 2005.				