

Monitoring and prioritising in a segmented market from a transaction and relational perspective

Ann Clarke
acl@sam.sdu.dk

Per V. Freytag (Corresponding author)
pvf@sam.sdu.dk

University of Southern Denmark
Department of Entrepreneurship & Relationship management
Engstien 1
6000 Kolding
Denmark

Abstract

The aim of segmentation is to reach the customer in a distinctive manner. As the needs and wants of the buyer change, it is necessary to detect distinctive changes through monitoring. However, how the monitoring takes place can vary significantly within a transaction and a relational perspective. Within a more transaction-oriented segmentation perspective (often named transactional) monitoring relates to changes in the general market conditions, the intensity of market competition, developments between segments and developments in segments. Monitoring in a relationship and network perspective is a matter of learning about the firm's network position, how the network is operating and what role the firm plays within it. It is also a matter of choosing partners and being chosen as a partner.

This paper takes form of a literature study. It demonstrates how the two perspectives differ in terminology, assumptions and implications with regard to how monitoring can be conducted. First, monitoring based on a transaction perspective is discussed, followed by the relationship and network perspective. Finally, the two perspectives are discussed in correlation and the fundamental differences are highlighted.

Introduction

Segmentation is today one of the core concepts within mainstream marketing (Söllner and Rese, 2001). Segmentation is said to be a central concept for successfully managing the marketing strategies and programmes within industrial settings (Albert, 2002). In order to achieve these benefits, it is important to have a good and up-to-date understanding of the customers (Dibb and Wensley, 2002). Therefore, monitoring for segmentation is part of the overall strategic decisions in the organisation (Walters, 1997). To have an effective segment strategy over time, the firm should have a thorough understanding of the customers' needs. However, needs and wants are not constant; they change over time due to factors on the supply and demand side. In line with Dickson 1992, p. 71, we assume "... that the market will be in a constant state of change, but the rate of change of supply and demand will vary over time". The issue of how to handle change in the segments is therefore crucial. If the firm fails to understand and react to changes in the segments, the market strategy can be undermined. The firm might stay in an unprofitable market, lose a unique positioning within a market, target segments that lack the growth and profitability of other segments, or target customers within a segment with an undesirable market offering. It therefore becomes important for a firm to continuously monitor the market, the segments and the customers in order to know when and how to react to the changes.

In order to make adequate decisions, the organisation has to make sure that the appropriate information is available. Traditionally, monitoring consists of analysis of past developments and the current situation, as well as future projections to discover trends and identify likely opportunity structures (Reeder et al. 1991). It is suggested that the firm periodically conduct a marketing audit - a comprehensive, periodical, and systematic evaluation of the firm's marketing operation that specifically analyses the market environment and the firm's internal marketing activities. (Hutt and Speh, 1998; Kotler, 1991). The acquired information has to be evaluated based on the firm's prioritisations in general.

Even though monitoring of segments has been seen as important within the segmentation literature, a limited amount of contributions has been found. The deficit has not gone unnoticed. Mitchell and Wilson (1998, p. 431) state that "keeping market segments under constant review is something on which few studies have reported, despite increasing recognition of the volatility of the competitive

environment”. Plank (1985) notes that in the segmentation literature there are limited discussions of feedback loops or other dynamic considerations. Hlavacek and Reddy (1986) also comment that the literature to date has totally ignored the dynamic and changing nature of industrial market segments over time. Day (2000, p. 28) has recently put it this way “Much of the essential knowledge about the customer relationships and the skill base that puts it to use is tacit and dispersed”.

There are different paths that can lead to a situation where segmentation is outdated or inappropriate. These can vary from radical changes that can quickly change an industry, or more incremental changes that take place over a longer time, for example changes in the attractiveness of selected segments or the manner in which they should best be approached.

How to monitor the market does not only depend on the dynamics of the market and the internal changes in the firm, it also depends on the nature of the market in which it operates and the type of relationship it holds.

The nature of the market has been discussed much within marketing (Anderson & Narus, 2001, Brodie et al. 1997, Campbell, 1985, Day 2000, Webster, 1991, Ritter, 2007). Campbell (1985) was one of the first within IMP who classified buyer-seller relationships. In Campbell’s classification, a distinction was made between independent, dependent and interdependent markets. In independent markets, customers and seller play the market as many sellers and customers exist and no bonds are attached. Dependent markets are markets where only one or few sellers or customers exist and the counterpart has to make use of limited supply or demand options. Finally, market situations arise when both customers and sellers has a cooperative perspective and wants to develop bonds. Ritter (2007) has made a similar attempt as Campbell in classifying relationships. Ritter includes the organisation, by arguing that command market situations come close to a hierarchy. When an organisation is dependent on another organisation, it has similarities with control within an organisation – “hierarchies are not synonymous to (internal) organization” (Ritter, p. 197). Due to Ritter (2007) a business relationship can be described as matter of:

- a. Whether the relation is hierarchical, cooperative or anonymous
- b. Whether the key drivers in the relation are rules, synergy or price
- c. Whether the dependence in the relation is one-sided, balanced or not existing

- d. Whether division of labour is determined by one-side, mutual agreed upon or is set by the market

A. to d. reflect different extremes. Due to different positioning in its relations with its customers, a firm will in its monitoring of the market have to look for different aspects in its relations with the market. When a market is anonymous, it is about detaching the overall developments in the markets and how different target groups in the market move. When relations with a particular customer exist, it is about understanding in what direction the customer overall develops and how the customer wants to relate to seller in the future. And it is about identifying new possible customers in the market (Zolkiewski & Turnbull, 2002). A hierarchical or cooperative perspective may exist with a particular customer. The firm which monitor in hierarchical or cooperative market situations will have to detect what is going on in a particular another organisation. Overall, the monitoring aspects therefore are similar when a hierarchical or cooperative perspective exists. Some of the aspects looked for may be of different importance depending on whether dependence or cooperation exists. Although overall the main challenge is to acquire valid information about a particular organisation (Carson et al., 2001) and how the firm is embedded in the network (Uzzi, 1997). In other words, the argument is that monitoring within business marketing segmentation is about gathering information from an anonymous market and from well-known customers.

In some of the relationship marketing literature (Bruhn, 2003; Day, 2000; Little & Marandi, 2003), monitoring has been discussed. In this part of the relationship literature, the perspective is not very different from mainstream marketing. The idea is still the same; that it is important to monitor the customers so that measures of performance, economic impact and indicators of changes that may have impact on the customer relationships in the future can be found. Within the IMP perspective, monitoring customers has not been a dominating theme. A central theme within the IMP perspective, however, has been the network position. Identifying different positions within a network has been a way to understand how changes may affect the individual firm (Johanson & Mattson, 1992; Anderson et al., 1998; Hertz & Hultman, 2004).

The type of relationships highly affects the firms' situation and potential to develop. Some customers will be very close to the focal firm, and the firms will in cooperation discuss and develop an understanding of the future market needs. Monitoring in close cooperation will therefore to a

high extent mean creation of mutual understanding and visions of the future (Henneberg et al., 2004).

Most of the existing literature on segmentation assumes to some extent that firms have a more arm's length relation with customers (Freytag & Clarke, 2001). However, some customers have closer relations with the seller. In such situations, it will be possible to acquire more direct information about changes in priorities of the customer. To some extent this holds the advantage that it is possible to create offerings as wanted by the customer even though changes have occurred. In relation to this, an important question is how the seller can use what has been learned about and in interaction with the buyer.

Put very simply, two types of customer relationship may exist. One type of relationship where very close relationships exist and another where a more arm's length relationship exists. The selling firm will, generally speaking, be interested in getting information from both types of customers so that the firm may obtain knowledge and learn from both types of relationships!

In this paper, market monitoring is seen from both a relational and a transactional perspective. The following questions arise: How can the market be monitored? How does the perspective deal with different purposes of monitoring? I. e. re-segmentation, choice of new segments and adaptation of market offerings.

First, market monitoring, as it is usually described within mainstream marketing literature, is described. Secondly, the particular challenges and possibilities close customer interaction gives to monitoring are discussed. Finally, it is discussed if and to what extent monitoring within an arm's length or a close relationship go together.

Factors Linked to Monitoring on a Segmented Market – a transactional perspective

The starting point for segmentation within a transaction perspective is often an understanding of a market with a large amount of customers that exists in an anonymous market (Brodie et al. 2001, Freytag and Mols, 2001). The market is heterogeneous. It is often assumed that firms have an arm's length relation to the customers, and relationships with customers are only to a limited degree taken

into account (Ghosh and John, 1999). The focus is on the individual exchange where customers are supposed to discuss the price of a rather standardised offering (Ritter, 2007).

Segmentation has traditionally been seen in close relation to the marketing mix. Thus authors contend that the goal of segmentation is to divide a large market into smaller components that are homogenous with respect to their response to a marketing mix (Griffith and Pol, 1994; Danneels, 1996; Choffray and Lilien, 1980).

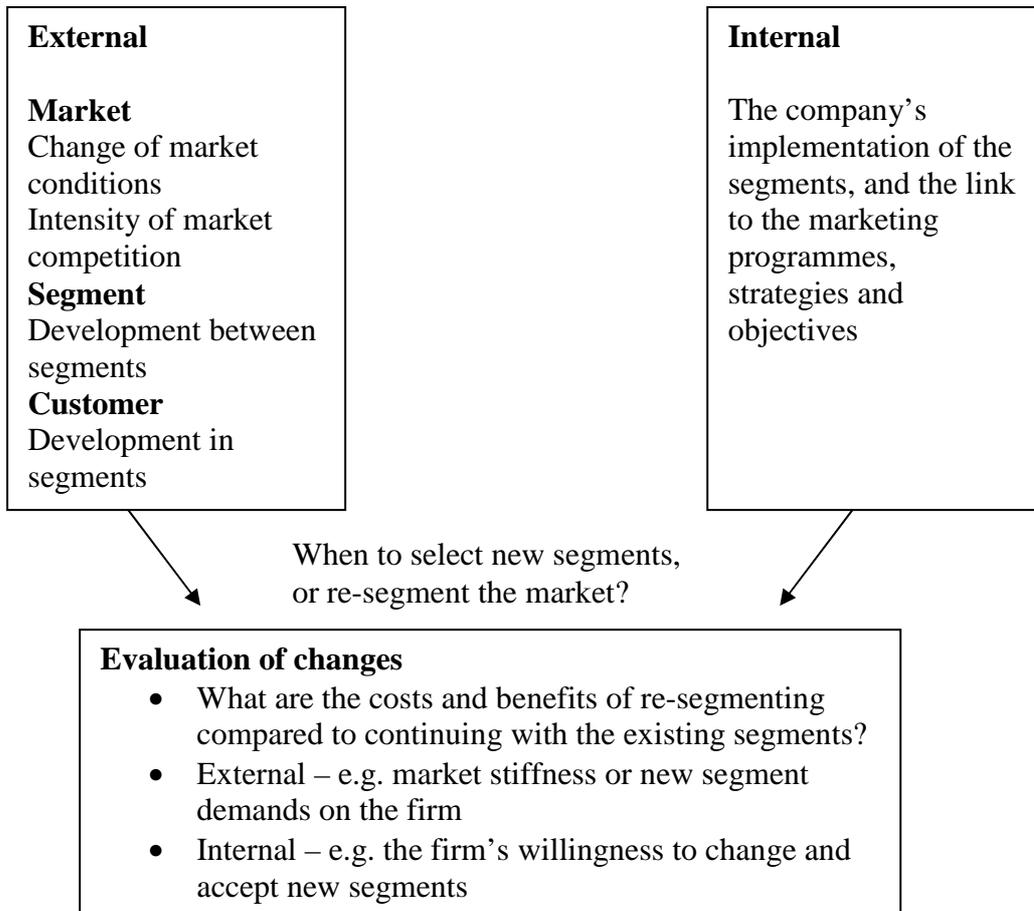
The transaction market perspective assumes that the firm can choose more freely between the segments, as they have not established close relations and only to a limited degree consider the resource capabilities within the organisation (Day 2000). As the firm is not burdened by previous choices, it is relatively easy to reconsider. The monitoring should improve the firm's capability to adjust its offering to the customers, select new segments, but also consider when it is necessary to re-segment the market.

Johnson (1996) proposes that there are three levels to observe when monitoring industrial markets; these are market, segments, and customers. Furthermore, Webster (1991), Kotler (1991), and Hutt and Speh (1998) state that a firm should monitor for changes both internally and externally. This forms the base for the following figure on the traditional transaction perspective on monitoring. The figure and levels within it will be further described below.

Figure 1: Factors Linked to Monitoring on a Segmented Market - a transaction perspective

What to monitor for externally?

What to monitor for internally?



What to monitor for externally based on the transaction perspective

Customer and segment level

On the customer level, the segments should be continuously monitored for changes that affect the response of the customer to the market offering of the firm. Relevant changes could be monitored within the marketing mix parameters as well as changes in the customers' purchasing behaviour should be monitored.

The segments can change and it is necessary to re-confirm the existence of the identified segments (Goller et. al., 2002). As well as Calantone and Sawyer (1978) found that benefit segments were relatively intact over a two year period, but over time there were some differences in base importance which could affect the marketing strategy. Therefore, it is also necessary to monitor at the segment level in order to investigate and follow the segments' development over time to evaluate whether the selected segments are still attractive or other segments have become more

attractive. Thus current selected segments may not continue to remain attractive due to changes within the segments' growth, level of competition, the customers' needs, etc. The effectiveness of the firm to handle the different segments can change and as consequent the effectiveness of implementation of the segments should be monitored (Kotler, 1991).

However, it might not be sufficient to evaluate the identified segments over time, it is also necessary to monitor and challenge the foundation on which the segmentation is based in order to evaluate when it is necessary to re-segment the market (Johnson, 1996). In this relation, the firm should evaluate whether the bases used to segment the market are still appropriate, as changes here can change the nature of the segments and their relevance for the firm. Furthermore, the relative importance of segmentation bases might have changed. There are areas that can help indicate whether it is appropriate to re-segment and consequently monitor the market. For example, if new customer groups/classes seem to have appeared that cannot be placed in the current segmentation, or if segment members start moving out of the segment, or the segments migrate from each other. In this relation, it should be monitored whether the heterogeneity between the segments is still larger than the homogeneity within the segments, or if segments which were previously homogeneous are becoming heterogeneous in some important areas; e.g. purchasing, preferences, product and service requirements, selection of distribution channels, etc.

Finally, how effectively the marketing strategy is implemented within the various segments is an area that are suggested in the literature. Thus different control measures have been proposed, e.g. customer conversion analysis and segment profitability analysis, which can help establish the gap between the intended and realised strategies (Goller et. al, 2002; Bonoma and Shapiro, 1984; Kotler 1991).

The Market Level

The final level Johnson (1996) proposes should be monitored is the market in general. The changing conditions in customer industries and the impact on the needs and wants of customers should be monitored as well as competitor actions and how they might affect customer preferences (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). In principle, a distinction can be made between two types of change. Some types of change will change the name of the game forever, and other changes will only affect who is winning the game which is played at a certain point of time (Day & Schoemaker, 2000). For

example, a new technology may fundamentally change the conditions on a market whereas change in the competition can change who is winning as an example inform of a competitor's new promotion campaign. Actions on the markets may contain both elements, changing market conditions and intensifying competition. The firm should monitor such areas as entry of new rivals, launching of new products, developments in technology, the effect of changes in governmental regulation and protection (Mitchell and Wilson, 1998).

What to Monitor for Internally

The firm itself is part of the changing environment, especially since it develops and refines its capabilities in consideration of its customers' evolving needs (Webster, 1991). Thus it is necessary to monitor externally as well as internally in order to assess what customers and segments to handle in the future and how attractive the present segmentation is for the firm.

In principle the internal monitoring deals with the assessment of the implementation of the segments, and the link to marketing programmes, strategies and objectives (Kotler, 2000). The internal monitoring is reflected in the question of what we want and what we can do. Overall it is very much a question of whether there is a good match between organisation and market and whether the organisation has succeeded in making the match.

Should the Firm React to Changes?

When changes are identified, the firm must consider whether the changes warrant re-segmenting of the market or selection of new segments. The significance and importance of the changes should be considered in comparison to the cost of targeting new customers with an adjusted market offering. And if a re-segmentation is contemplated, then the cost of re-segmenting, both in relation to actually carrying out the segmentation, but not least in the implementation and adjustment of the market offer, should be considered. The more extensively segmentation is used, the more expensive it is. Specialised products, price schedules, advertising programmes and specialised sales people all add costs. However, there has in the segmentation literature been a limited focus on costs related to segmenting the market and implementation of segments. One of the few is Bonoma and Shapiro (1984) that present three areas to consider regarding the economics of industrial marketing segmentation. How does the depth of the segmentation affect its cost? How does tailoring a marketing mix for segments affect the cost of segmentation? How do the chosen segments' special

characteristics affect the economics of doing business? The question is whether the firm should react to the changes or not. This will depend on the cost and benefits of selecting new segments or re-segmentation compared to maintaining the present segments.

Whether the firm should react to the changes will therefore depend on more than one side of the market, i.e. the extent of change and urgency for response, the market stiffness and thus the customers' willingness to change, the potential confusion it might create in the positioning, etc. This should be evaluated against the internal aspects, e.g. how easy it is for the firm to adjust to new segments, acceptance, cost and requirements of specialised marketing programmes, new strategies and adjustment of objectives to handle new segments.

Monitoring in close relationships

Monitoring within a relational perspective can be seen as an ongoing process of understanding how changes will affect relations (Håkansson et al., 2004). As the firm is seen as embedded in a net of relationships, monitoring means both trying to detect how different factors of importance may change and how such changes may be seen from different perspectives (Ford, 2002). E.g. buyers and sellers may have different perceptions of a relationship. Being embedded in a network at the same time also means that the firm is not on its own when trying to understand what changes are taking place. Within close relationships, exchange of information may lead to a more extensive understanding of changes and motives for actions as other actors will be involved in interpreting information (Gummesson, 2006). Monitoring in a relational perspective means trying to understand the position of the firm and how changes may affect this, or as Ritter (p. 200) phrases it "relationships are under permanent development and change". In other words, monitoring changes in customer requirements is about understanding the firm's network position.

Johanson and Mattsson have defined network position in the following manner (1992, p. 211) "Each actor is engaged in a number of exchange relationships with other actors. These relationships define the position of the actor in the network. Since positions can be defined for all the actors in the network, the concept can be used to characterise network structure and network distance between actors". Monitoring can therefore generally be seen as an assessment of the network position of the firm with the intent to learn how customers' requirements change. At the same time it is clear that in the monitoring process, it is not so much the structures per se which are of interest,

but the changes in structure over time. Still it is possible to study changes with structure as the starting point. Anderson et al. 1998 have put it this way; “Changes within a network should be studied adopting a stability dimension, i.e. old positions disappear and/or new ones appear, as well as a change-process dimension, i.e. the actors' intended and created behaviour” (p. 168). For the individual firm, customer monitoring is about realising how change processes are created and how they may affect the focal firm.

In networks several actors will act simultaneously and it will be difficult to interpret all the actions and to get a clear picture out of it. Ford & Håkansson (2005) take the problem of understanding interacting structures a step further by stating: “The complexity of these structures and their evolution over time and distance may mean that actors are not aware of the existence of some interdependencies nor may they appreciate their implications”(p. 15).

Anderson et al. (1998) have tried to grasp how actors deal with change and introduced the concept of role; “We use the concept of role to express such actor activities as emanate from the creation and sense-making process that characterizes each actor's own intentions and interpretations” (p. 172). Still it makes clear it is difficult if not impossible to be aware of all changes even in close relationships at all time. Monitoring relationships and learning about how these can be interpreted becomes an important challenge to deal with.

Following along Håkansson’s and Snehota’s (1995) activity, resource and actor perspective 4 monitoring areas emerge:

1. Changes within the firm
2. Changes in the relationship
3. Changes taking place in the network
4. Changes in the general business environment and in other networks

Changes within the firm

“Dynamic interaction between single actors and how this relates to the development of the total structure of a network is not a theme that has been focused in many areas of research” (Ford & Håkansson, 2005, p. 17).

Still, a monitoring issue is to detect changes inside individual firms. Information about these changes will give the possible to identify possible implications for the interactions with other firms.

Examples of two issues in relation to changes within the individual firm are choice of partner and balance in the relationship. The choice of a partner is a double choice – choosing and being chosen. Change within the individual firm could change the attractiveness of a partner (Wilkinson et al., 2005). Going into or being in a relationship is affected by the balance within the relationship. Changes within one firm may influence the other firm, and the firm can feel forced into unintentional cooperation with powerful counterparts or feel forced to stay on in a relationship (Cox, 2001).

As in the transactional perspective, monitoring within in the firm is about acquiring information about changes in strategy, resource, competence, etc. As mentioned above such changes may affect how the attractiveness of the other firm is perceived.

Another distinctive feature of the relational perspective is that it makes it clear that market monitoring makes it necessary to link market developments of the firms to the supplier base. A firm's repertoire in fulfilling the particular needs of different segments is very much dependent on its choice of suppliers and their development (Gadde & Håkansson, 1994; Gadde & Snehota, 2000). Monitoring for changes in segments can in other words not be seen in isolation from the supply side.

Changes in the relationship

Having close relationships makes it possible to get a better understanding of the needs and wants of the customer. But when choosing to fulfill particular needs, the firms might cut out other possibilities. Each actor gives the other time and attention that cannot therefore devote elsewhere” (Ford & Håkansson 2005, p. 18). What kind of distinctive developments is taking place in the cooperating firms, and what impacts will they have on the focal firm? Depending on competences to contribute and the overall relationship between the parties, the focal firm will have the opportunity to influence the buyers' direction of development. This holds the merit of making it possible to satisfy the customers, but at the same time it holds the challenge of making sure that the choices made are appropriate for the customers now and in the future! The relationship level is

about understanding the effects of jointness. Relationship means understanding that decisions not just follows along the intentions of one party, but is a manifestation of combined intentions. At a practical level, monitoring on this level is about changes in the exchange of product or services, information, financial and social relations. This should be seen both on a day-to-day basis as well as on a strategic level.

Changes taking place in the network

“The interaction between two actors is related to interactions with others and it may be influenced, mediated or facilitated by these others” Ford & Håkansson, 2005 p. 18). Being part of a network holds the merit of knowing some of the roles played by other actors, and at the same time it is important to get a picture of what is happening generally in the network. “...every actor in a network has a specific position and its interactions reflects this. In the short term these positions provide the multiple and relative contexts for interaction. In the long term, continuing interactions successively change these positions and this structure” (Ford & Håkansson, 2005, p. 17).

Traceability of changes can therefore be difficult, as changes may be introduced very early or later in a supply network, e.g. by a third party supplier. Even though such changes may be difficult to trace, they may have severe impacts on the focal firm. Changes may threaten the network position of a firm. Living up to the benefits and obligations of a firm may become difficult. Overall it is a question of monitoring for the general developments in the network. Is the network growing by acquiring new technology and setting new standards and are in front regarding design, or is the network struggling with adaptation to changes.

Changes in the general business environment and in other networks

Some changes may come from outside the network. For example new technologies may be developed all over the world and still hold a danger of having a severe impact on a particular network (Biemanns 1992). It can therefore be difficult to predict how long the life-span of a product may be. A challenge for the firm and in the relations with other firms may therefore be to imagine how new technologies can and will be used within a given network. Examples of other changes to monitor for on this level is legal changes and globalisation.

Interdependence and prioritisation

Having closer relationships gives the focal firm the opportunity to get some closer insights into developments and interests in change. It also makes it clear that a high degree of interdependence exists. Firms can only to some extent make choices on their own (Wilkinson et al., 2005; Ford & Håkansson, 2005). Monitoring customers becomes a matter of understanding such interdependencies and the prioritisations in and between firms.

Differences in monitoring within the two perspectives

Monitoring for changes in customer requirements is quite different due to the different understanding of markets within the two perspectives. In traditional marketing, customer information is about changes in requirements based on an understanding of the customer as a given entity. Information evolves around the segment and is about the ability to measure it, how substantial it is, whether it is accessible or not, the possibilities of differentiation and what actions may be necessary to achieve the desired results.

In the relational perspective, customer information is about understanding the network position. This means detecting what role the firm is playing in interaction with other actors. The focal firm is interacting with other firms on a continuous basis. As a part of these interacting processes, the focal firm will acquire knowledge about the future developments on different levels. The matrix below presents the main characteristics of monitoring within the two perspectives.

<i>The traditional marketing perspective</i>	<i>The relational marketing perspective</i>
The seller is the active part	All actors are active
Sequential planning perspective	Continuous adaptation and learning
Passive information registration	Mutual knowledge creation
Level of analysis: customer, segment and market	Level of analysis: focal firm, dyad, network and general environment All actors are active
Limited internal monitoring	Monitoring for positioning possibilities
Aligning the organisation to the market	Interacting and adapting the firm within its relationships

Matrix 1: A Comparison of the Two Perspectives

Overall, the monitoring process within the traditional marketing perspective is an information processing perspective where information about the reality is obtained quite passively. The relational perspective is more a matter of collecting knowledge through interaction. This highlights the importance of learning how to deal with the outcome of the monitoring process.

The individual actor learns how to deal with its customers over time by being more or less sensitive to ongoing changes and decide what emphasis to assign to them. On the individual level, Kolb (1984) has conceptualised learning as “experiential learning”. The learning cycle contains four points; conceptualisation, observation and reflection, forming abstract concepts, and testing in new situations. The learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points - and is described as a continuous spiral. On the other hand, it is suggested that the learning process often begins with an actor carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of the action in a particular situation, e.g. acting in accordance with the chosen segments.

Organisations are collectives, where actions are based on more than a single individual. Based on Kolb’s learning cycle, Dixon (1994) has conceptualised a collective learning cycle (1) the widespread generation of information, (2) the integration of information into the organisational context, (3) the collective interpretation of information and (4) responsible action based on the interpreted meaning. Organisations in industrial markets have close relationships with their customers, the quasi-organisations where seller and buyer learn from each other (Håkansson & Snehota, 1990). This will have an effect on collective learning, e.g. how markets are monitored, interpretations are made and what prioritisation is undertaken.

Mutual understanding of the future created together with the customers and with the other actors in the network holds the threat that the parties will be stuck with a mutual understanding and will not tolerate different opinions or pictures! This will make the network vulnerable to new technology and the entrance of new competitors.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to discuss two different perspectives to customer monitoring. The two perspectives have been unfolded, and it has been demonstrated how monitoring is viewed. The discussed topics demonstrate that the two perspectives are very different in their terminology, assumptions and implications with regard to how customer monitoring should be conducted. Seen from a pragmatic point of view, there may be a demand for a combination of the two perspectives as many firms face both customers with whom they have close relationships and others with whom they have more distant relationships. From a theoretical point of view, this is a problematic undertaking. One way to deal with this in the individual firm may be an ad hoc combination of the two perspectives, but due to the very different assumptions and terminologies there is a need for new comprehensive perspectives.

These changes may lead to adjustments in marketing goals, strategies and marketing programmes. Monitoring within this perspective is a matter of obtaining market information, selecting to what changes to attach weight and to decide what changes are needed in relation to customers, the prioritisation of the segments and whether a re-segmentation is needed. The learning aspect is primarily limited to fine-tuning within a given understanding of the market.

From a theoretical point, a combination of the transactional and the relational perspective is problematic. The fundamental view of reality, in particular the market, is quite different. As some firms face both arm's length transactions and at the same time have long term relations with other customers, there is a need for a comprehensive framework. Ritter's (2007) framework holds some of the prospects, but more needs to go into the top in the future.

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