

Customer References in Launching of Industrial Innovations - A Case Study in Finnish Metal Industry

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Abstract

Customer references are important in business marketing because of global competition, customer and market uncertainties, and rapidly changing and complex technologies. The research of references is still new in industry, however, especially in traditional industries such as metal industry. The study concerns the utilization of references in business-to-business marketing. The study has been conducted as a case study in Finnish metal industry, and it focuses on reference practices in industrial marketing and launching industrial innovations. The research and the first findings of the pilot case study are presented.

Key words: customer references, launching, industrial innovations, business marketing

1 INTRODUCTION

Customer references have become important in business marketing because of global competition, customer and market uncertainties, and rapidly changing and complex technologies. Customers tend to refer to each other more and more when making buying decisions in today's unpredictable world. At the same time managing innovations and research and development have become important strategic issues in business marketing. Due to global competition, companies have to develop new products at a more rapid phase to meet changing customer needs and to compete with new, more advanced product releases. Global competition also shortens product lifetimes and companies have to have products at the different stages of the product launch process continuously. References are valuable when introducing innovations to global markets.

The utilization of references is already a common marketing practice in business marketing, and references have an essential role in such strategic actions as launching new products and entering new markets, as well as in enhancing a company's competitive position in the industry. Reference practices include for example reference lists, reference visits, brochures and exhibitions. However, the concept of reference has been used only in a few academic studies in international industrial and business marketing (Cornelsen and Diller, 1998; Helm, 2000; Jalkala and Salminen, 2005; Ruokolainen, 2005; Salminen, 1997 and 2001 and Salminen and Möller, 2003, 2004 and 2006). A need for reference research exists and the latest studies suggest that more theoretically guided studies on the practices and relevance of referencing behaviour are needed. They also encourage for new research in this field (Salminen and Möller, 2003 and 2006).

In the present study the following definition of reference is used: "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 co-operation performance" (Salminen, 1997). The emerging view of references is discussed in marketing literature including marketing communication, high technology marketing, relationship marketing, sales management, key account management, project marketing, market development literature and product marketing literature. Based on the marketing literature and previous research the various tasks of references in business marketing include increasing the supplier's competence, credibility and reputation, and decreasing the buyer's uncertainty and perceived risk. (Salminen and Möller, 2003)

2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of the present study is to increase the understanding of the utilization of references in business-to-business marketing. The results are expected provide new knowledge of the use of references when launching innovations and show how to increase efficiency in sales and marketing, as well as shed light for establishing customer relationships. Ultimately, the results are expected reveal new practices in the utilization of reference portfolios in launching innovations. As an outcome of the study, a reference portfolio model for launching industrial innovations will be constructed. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are reference practises in business marketing?
2. How industrial innovations are launched?
3. How to create an optimal reference portfolio for launching industrial innovations?

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The study described in this paper is currently in pilot case phase and focuses on reference practises in business marketing and launching industrial innovations. The paper introduces the research setting and the first findings of the pilot case study in Finnish metal industry. Further research objectives are also discussed.

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3 BUILDING FRAMEWORK FOR EMPIRICAL STUDY

The existing knowledge in utilizing references is quite scarce. In order to acquire knowledge of the phenomenon under study (i.e. references), academic literature and journals have been reviewed. For further research literature of customer relationships, e.g. Ford et al., 1998 and 2002; Ford and McDowell, 1999; Johnson and Selnes, 2004 and 2005 and Zolkiewski and Turnbull (2002), and of launch marketing, e.g. Ali et al., 1995; Beard et al., 1996; Chisnall, 1989; Choffray and Lilien, 1984 and 1986; Hultink et al., 1997 and Rope and Hautamäki, 1991 will be reviewed to build a theoretical framework.

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A case study type of qualitative approach is employed in this research. Probably the widest known definition of case study has been given by Yin (2003). According to him a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident”. A characteristic and one of the strengths of case study is the utilization of multiple sources of evidence. Yin (2003) divides case studies to descriptive, exploratory and explanatory. In the present study, in the empirical part qualitative analysis methods, such semi-structured interviews will be used, and a reference portfolio model will be created by constructive research.

The constructive approach emerged in the literature of management research methodology in the 1990's. The objective of constructive research in the context of business research is to solve relevant problems of business management by creating innovative models, frameworks, methods and other constructions, and also by testing the functionality of the solutions during the research process. The constructions are socially constructed artifacts, meaning that they are invented, not discovered (Kasanen et al., 1991; Lukka, 2000 and Lukka and Tuomela, 1998). In the classification of Neilimo and Näsi (1980), four methodological approaches are distinguished: conceptual, decision-oriented, nomothetical and action oriented research approaches. The constructive research approach has been added in the classification by Kasanen et al. (1991). The classification of research approaches and the positioning of the constructive research approach are presented in Figure 1.

The phases of the constructive research process are as follows (Kasanen et al., 1991 and Lukka, 2000):

1. Find a practical and relevant problem, which has potential for a theoretical contribution as well.
2. Examine the potential for long-term research co-operation with the target organizations.
3. Obtain deep pre-understanding of the topic area both practically and theoretically.
4. Innovate a solution idea and develop a problem-solving construction, which has potential for a theoretical contribution as well.
5. Implement the solution and test how it works.
6. Ponder the scope of the applicability of the solution.
7. Reflect the findings in prior literature.

	Theoretical	Empirical
Descriptive	Conceptual approach	Nomothetical approach Action-oriented approach
Normative	Decision-oriented approach	Constructive approach

Figure 1. Research Approaches in Business Economics (Kasanen et al., 1991).

3.1 Relationship Marketing

Inter-organisational theory focused on activities and processes, which take place within organisations (Håkansson, 1982). According to literature of relationship marketing all companies are involved in relationships with their suppliers, customers and other business partners. The business customer brings its problems and uncertainties to a supplier and a supplier brings its ability to provide a solution (Ford et al., 1998). Companies are members of a business network consisting of a large number of active and heterogenous companies each interacting with others and seeking solutions to their different problems (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson and Snehota, 2002). Companies also face a number of uncertainties in their purchases, irrespective of the problems that their purchases are indented to solve. The uncertainties including need, market and transaction uncertainty affect the requirements that customers have of their suppliers. (Ford et al., 2002).

In relationship marketing references are especially important when trying to overcome the uncertainties and changes in the market. The relationship marketing literature also suggests that the utilization of references has a crucial role in winning potential new customers and breaking ongoing competing supplier relationship (Salminen and Möller, 2003). According to Ford business marketers and their customers are deeply concerned the value that is provided by the market offerings between them (Ford and McDowell, 1999). Relationships can be the primary assets of companies. Without relationships neither business marketers nor their customers can continue to trade and have little value without relationships. (Ford and Håkansson, 2006). Continuous learning is essential for the survival and success for the firms operating in the changing and complex environment (Tidd, Bessant and Pavitt, 2005). Networking is based on incomplete knowledge. The inadequacy of each company's knowledge means "learning by doing" and is an important aspect of networking. (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson and Snehota, 2002)

Zolkiewski and Turnbull (2002) suggest that relationship portfolios may be a key factor in successful relationship management. They state that a portfolio analysis does not only provide

resource allocation but also an important source of knowledge about customers and suppliers. The challenge, however, is to manage each portfolio optimally. Zolkiewski and Turnbull also recommend the use of multivariate analysis incorporating market- or customer-oriented dimensions, because profitability is not necessarily the only criterion for relationship analysis and management. A company may seek to achieve non-financial objectives through customer and supplier relationships, such as technical development and reference sites. A model of customer portfolio lifetime value that is developed recently focuses especially on value of close versus weak relationships in customer portfolio. In business-to business context, innovative companies are developing strategies and processes for creating value with all of their customers in the portfolio. The objective of marketing is to maximise return on capital through investments in the right types of customer relationships. (Johnson and Selnes 2005)

3.2 Launching Industrial Innovations

According to Rope and Hautamäki (1991) launch means the market introduction of a new or renewed product, which is either new to the company or the market, aiming at commercial success. The important task of the marketing communications is to make the potential customers aware of the unknown product and arise interest of the target group. (Rope and Hautamäki, 1991) Standard marketing tools and techniques are of limited use for development and commercialization of novel and complex new products, and relationships between developers and users are important. Technology and markets co-evolve over time and developers and potential users interact. The commercialization process for complex products involves technical knowledge and there is a burden on developers to educate potential users, which requires close links. Innovation is not just coming up with good ideas, inventions, it is a process of growing the ideas into practical use. Innovation is driven by the ability to see connections, to spot opportunities and to take advantage of them. Success derives from the ability to mobilize knowledge, technological skills and experience to create new products, processes and services. The process of identifying, exploring and preparing the market for launch of new product include among others customer testing by prototypes, test marketing and launching into an internal market. (Tidd, Bessant and Pavitt, 2005)

Increasing trend in innovation management is towards building innovation networks in a purposive fashion, “engineered” networks, a network whose members are adopting and embedding innovative ideas (Tidd, Bessant and Pavitt, 2005). A network perspective implies that companies look beyond their direct dyadic relationships and seek capitalize on the wider network in which they are embedded (Johnsen and Ford, 2004). Being able to produce core value through established vertical nets is generally necessary condition for achieving incremental innovations through partnerships. These provide the platform for more radical innovations through the future strategic nets. Also by being able to manage one business relationship well is a necessary learning step towards to work in a net of complex relationships. (Möller, Rajala and Svahn , 2005)

Ruokolainen found that one of the main problems of the start-up technology company is to find the first customer reference. Without references and thus without credibility, the start-up technology companies might have major problems convincing the next potential customer to buy the product. When launching innovations, similar problems are faced. The first customer reference is usually based on the various type of contacts that the entrepreneurs have gained (Ruokolainen and Igel, 2004). The positive reputation based on several references starts to play a role in gaining new customers. The reputation is a result from more than one customer

reference. Several successful customer references also prove that a supplier's success has not been a random phenomenon. (Ruokolainen, 2005)

4 PILOT CASE STUDY

Several reasons influenced the selection of the pilot case company. *First*, references are important resources for the company and they are utilized effectively for launching product innovations. Along the years the company has developed a well-established reference practises and procedures for utilizing references in marketing innovations. *Second*, the research problem originates from the researcher's practical experience of utilizing references for launch marketing in the pilot case company. *Third*, the research problem and phenomenon in the pilot case company was considered to have potential for a theoretical contribution. *Fourth*, due to good access, there is potential for long-term research co-operation with the case company.

Headquartered in Finland, the pilot case company is the preferred supplier of cutting-edge flow control technology, serving a wide range of process industries worldwide. The company's sales and service network covers over fifty countries and the products are mainly distributed through representative companies. Although operating in global markets, the company's market sector is quite narrow due to special products and product features that can be utilised only in specific processes. Even if belonging to small and medium-sized enterprises, the company is at the forefront in its field in addressing customer needs and making the customers' processes more competitive. The company's expertise builds on extensive application and process know-how derived from tens of thousands proven installations, as well as continuous product testing, research and development.

4.1 Data and Methodology

The aim of the case study is to gain a pre-knowledge of the phenomenon (i.e. references). Therefore, the target of the pilot case study was to find the answer to the first two research questions: what are reference practises in business marketing? How industrial innovations are launched? The questions were answered by analysing the reference practises of a case company.

In the present pilot case study, company reports, internal documents, interviews, and visits at reference customers have been used as the source for data collecting. The initial findings and observations are based on research framework and data collected during the researcher's working at the case company, at the early stage of the research process. The main source material of the empirical part was semi-structured interviews with six persons in the company's sales and marketing management in 2007. The constructive approach has been used as the research strategy of the study.

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4.2 Preliminary Findings

References have a great importance and value to the case company, because it delivers solutions. Solution refers to the total value proposition including products and spare parts or a special function, an application. A reference is knowledge of company's solution delivered to

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the customer, but a customer relationship and a co-operation with the customer are also understood as a reference. A reference is a proof of company's ability to deliver successful solutions to a certain industry. History of products and spare parts is followed in order to compare it with some other solutions delivered earlier and further used as reference to the potential customer. As a broad concept, reference reaches beyond one application and delivery, and has a longer life cycle. With references experiences of successful solutions are shared.

4.2.1 Reference Practices

The case company is at the forefront in its industry in utilizing references and the references are corner stones of the operation. It has conquered many new markets and market segments by using references. The main purpose for utilizing references is to show the benefits of the company's solutions and emphasise its expertise and knowledge of customer's process applications. References are acting as a tool for consultative and solution selling generating more customer contacts and sales. References are seen as an excellent mean to convince new customers of the excellence of the product in the target industries and applications, and promote sales. References are good sales arguments, means and tools for internal sales planning and control. By analyzing former customer references the company can target to new customers and offer them a proven, well performing product solution. References can also open doors for new customers. In the case company references are a tool for learning from customer how a successful solution can be further improved. Updating references is very important task in this sense. When product and solution is further developed according to customer feedback, a better offering to new customer can be given. Also when presenting positive references from some other industry the supplier's industry experience is expanded.

As a result of the long term co-operation the case company has developed a good relationship with many of its customers. The company's products provide multiple solutions. In corporation customers one solution can be offered first to one process and then to other processes. The customer acts then as an internal reference inside the corporation e.g. in pulp and paper industry from one department to another or between the companies in the group. Internal reference practices are also common within some industries between different companies e.g. in mining industry. Lifetime of the customer relationship can be prolonged as a customer relationship is used as a reference. Developing solutions to other process applications in co-operation with the customer will offer mutual benefit. When the reference can be duplicated with new process, marketing value increases. One successful solution can be expanded inside the customer company resulting with more sales and offerings. Customer relationships are good references also when having a long-term co-operation with globally operating engineering companies and OEMs, and selling expertise.

As a result of interviews and analyzing other data of the case company reference visits, reference lists and success stories are presented in Table 1, as the main reference practices. Consequently, reference model of the case company is proposed.

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Reference visits	Reference Lists	Success Stories
References communicated face-to-face by using reference lists, powerpoint presentations, brochures and success stories presented as case example for sales network and end customer	Submitted to the company's personnel through reference database	Enhance sales either by copying successful references or using references as a marketing tool for proving that the number of solutions is provided to the particular industry
Positive references and feedback shared with potential customers	Tailor-made reference reports provided for the sales network via email or extranet	Benefit participants in the sales network and encourage them to enter industries of which they do not have previous experience
With successful references shown existing customers' satisfaction with company's products and capability to perform in the new customer's processes	Specific reports for end customers presenting opportunities in their processes	Submitting press releases of successful process applications to magazines
Recording and updating reference information and real process data of product lifetimes	Existing customers offered spare part follow-up, which enables maintenance and preventive maintenance i.e. need for spare parts can be expected as reference information is used as an inventory list form	Emphasizing facts of how company's products have given solution to customer's problems, how the product excels the competing products and how much savings gained by choosing the company's product
Example: when visiting five potential customers in Germany in energy sector, reference information on the industry, application and product lifetimes were presented resulting to order from three companies		Contain objective information, better sales promotion tool than advertising

Table 1. Main Reference Practices

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The company has well established reference information system that tracks a vast portion of the 50 000 products. Knowledge of where the products have been installed, how they are being used and what the maintenance needs are, is important resource for the company. This knowledge is most valuable when recommending maintenance patterns and stocking requirements to existing customers and extremely persuasive when contacting potential customers. The case company cannot succeed in its business if the customer process and process problems are not known. The only way to convince a new customer of the product solutions is to collect experiences from the existing customers, which are used as reference. Successful sales can be duplicated with new similar customers. Due to this, the company has developed a systematic way to increase customer, application and process knowledge, which leads to targeted sales.

This procedure, a reference model is presented in the figure below. Figure 2 introduces the reference model and shows how the existing customer information is turned into knowledge and is acting as reference for the potential customers and also for the other existing customers. The effective usage of the reference database including information such as customer, industry, process and applications, and customer registers forms a basis for reference communication. Information from database is used in strategic marketing when targeting to different market segments. Usage of reference information also allows a better definition and focus on the customer potential. The various reference practices for communicating references to customers include reference lists, press releases and articles, advertising, direct

marketing, success stories, reference visits, promotional material, exhibitions, and seminars and training. References are communicated to the customers and the company's sales network through different channels among others face-to-face contact, direct mailing, printed and electrical media, and company web sites.

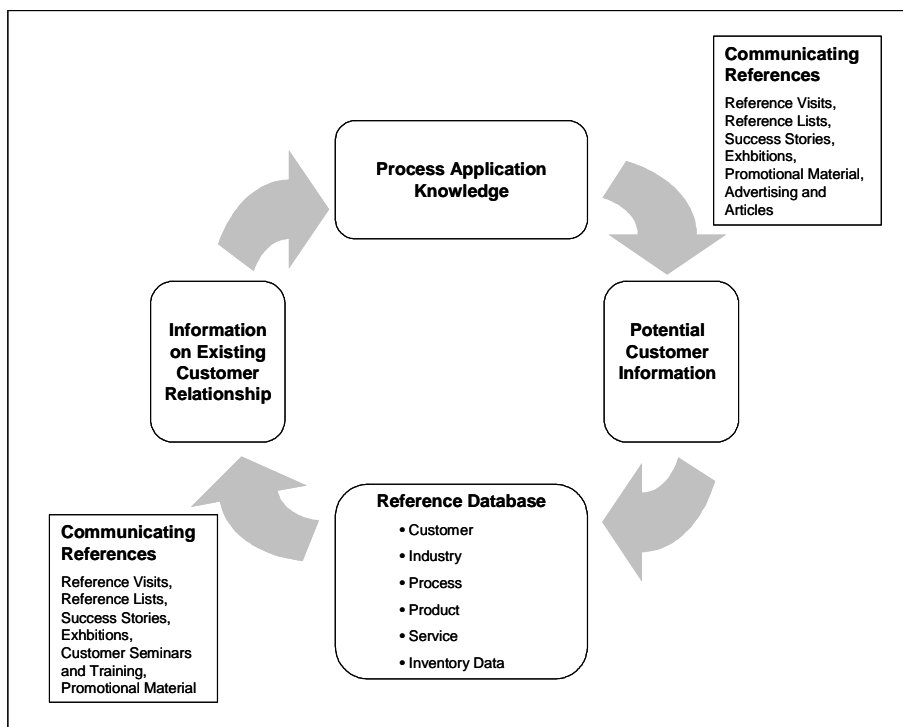


Figure 2. Reference Model of the Case Company

4.2.2 Reference Practices in Launching Innovations

The case company has launched innovations such as product and process innovations. Before starting the launch, the benefits and the sales arguments, which form the basis for the launch project, are defined. The launch will be targeted first to participants in the sales network and then to end customers. When the product is complete new for the case company, also the target customers are new. Even if industries and processes are similar to the current products, the target persons in the customer company are different. The launch is started from the customers with whom the company has established a good, long-term relationship. Based on the first results of interviews in the case company, forms of marketing and role of references in launching industrial innovations are introduced in Table 2.

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The case company produces special products that require expertise and personal contact. If the product or solution is new, it is a common practice to use references. When the process conditions and problems are similar the same reference reaches beyond the industry borders e.g. processes are similar at the first production phases in different process industries. One advantage of the company is that almost all customers have similar processes within the industry that they represent. The case company has a long industry experience and expertise

in industries such as mining and mineral processing. The existing customers are communicated innovations, which can improve the certain part in their process.

Form of Marketing	Role of Reference
Internet and magazines: two hundred press and news releases submitted at the beginning of this year when launching a new product	Industry and process expertise, company's reputation, image and existing customer network utilized as reference.
Importance of communication through networks, e.g. email, portals, usage of internet robots and virtual exhibition, is increasing.	In the case of process innovation, new application knowledge acts as reference and is copied to potential customers as soon as learning experiences from the first customers exists.
Other modes of marketing used: exhibitions, customer visits, test products for the customer and introduction material i.e. brochures, press releases, product pictures and technical data sheets, provided to the participants of the sales network.	Customers are shown parts of the process, which are familiar to them and by using references product, benefits and concrete application can be introduced.
Participants of the sales network are informed widely of product and process innovations at the annual sales conference and through extranet.	Prove that a customer already exists who has the solution and knows the product. Lot of references shown from various industries accumulated in years arise potential customer's interest, idea of excellence and high performance of the product.
Direct marketing: most of the launch material is localized in order to get optimal feedback.	References and customer knowledge of company, mode of operation and general process knowledge are considered as references.
Existing customers informed face-to-face about new product when it is applicable to their processes.	Existing references gained in marketing other company products are used for launching new products. Existing relationships and reference customers enhance promotion of new products.
Case and success stories: positive experiences of successful application in new industry or new application in the existing industry shared with potential customers for promoting sales to new industries and applications.	Referencing is based on the company's process and customer knowledge, and ability to solve customer's problems.
	Based on good reputation already the company's name is a reference and brand image of existing products increases creditability in industry. Successful references also strengthen the brand image.
	Reference database used for targeting marketing e.g. all existing and potential customers in the United States are sent information and promotion package of new product which launch started this year. References are useful working tools for targeting product or process innovations to new customers or applications.

Table 2. Forms of Marketing and Role of References in Launch

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5 CONCLUSIONS

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This paper has introduced the research setting and the first findings of the pilot case study. The aim of the case study is to increase the understanding of the use of references in business-to-business marketing, and reference practises and launching industrial innovations in business marketing have been explored. Consequently, a preliminary reference model has been proposed. On the basis of the first results it is proposed that the company is effectively utilizing references, but there is still a lot of unused potential for utilizing references and

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relationships. References are important resources for the company, which represents a traditional industry, metal industry. Several practises are utilized to communicate references to the customers and participants in the sales network. Reference visits, reference lists and success stories are considered the most common reference practices in the case company. The company has used various forms of marketing based on the effectively usage of references when launching industrial innovations. The references of the company have had a positive effect for increasing customer contacts and sales. Confidentiality matters are considered as slight limitation for access reference information and usage of references in some customer industries. Also due to differences in customer processes all the customer relationships need be treated as an individual case. As main development areas in the case company reference communication and more effective and innovative usage of references were found.

In the next phase, literature of customer relationship marketing and launch marketing will be reviewed to build a more rigid theoretical framework. The purpose is to examine launching industrial innovations. With help of the results of the pilot case study, a multiple case study setting will be built to find the specific reference practises especially used in launching industrial innovations. As an outcome of the study, a reference portfolio model will be created with the constructive research approach.

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