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**INTEGRATIVE BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS IN THE LIGHT OF INCREASING CUSTOMER AND SUPPLIER
INTEGRATION – FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND A CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

(WORK IN PROGRESS)

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ABSTRACT

As a kind of antipole to the globalisation of markets, companies in a business-to-business context have started to develop closer relationships with their customers as well as with a decreased number of selected suppliers. In literature, this development is mirrored for the most part by concepts like relationship marketing and supply chain management. In this paper, we narrow the focus to customer and supplier integration which can be seen as two relational mechanisms within the supply chain. We recognized that a high potential of customer and supplier integration is inherent to relationship marketing strategies treated in literature – a potential that has not been discovered and exploited to its full amount so far. Above all, this is true for long-term business relationships and networks, which will be the main focus of our research for this reason. We consider customer and supplier integration to be a standard of relationship marketing. On the basis of a literature review we identify key issues: After the discussion of the themes uncertainty, ‘power versus trust’ as ways to cope with it, value and innovation potential of integrative relationships, we take a closer look at the actors who are the driving force within business relationships and networks. As an incitement for future research, we develop a dynamic model as a basis for the deduction of hypotheses. We consider this relevant for revealing and understanding the mechanisms of customer and supplier integration as well as the dimensions of the constructs; the latter especially with regard to an operationalisation of the constructs which has not been accomplished so far.

Key words: relationship marketing, customer integration, supplier integration, conceptual model

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we introduce customer and supplier integration as a competitive strategy within relationship marketing that can enhance the performance of all companies involved. Precise structures which enforce the employees to act on the maxim “relationship orientation with customers and suppliers” are necessary as relationship marketing still lacks a precise definition (Payne and Frow, 2005; for definitions see for example Grönroos 1996, p. 7; Gummesson 1999, p.1; Zeithaml/Bitner/Gremler 2006, p. 177) and thus does not provide practitioners with an instruction manual in the sense of an “easy-to-implement list of groups of marketing variables or means of competition” – like the 4Ps do (Grönroos 1990, p. 140; Vargo and Lusch, 2006). This often leads to uncertainty on the part of the employees regarding the concrete implementation of relationship marketing. The result is that the higher degree of customer and supplier orientation that was intended originally is never achieved (Kleinaltenkamp, 1996).

Up to now, customer integration and supplier integration are discussed independently from one another in literature. We propose to merge both concepts into one strategy within relationship marketing. We thereby underline the advantageousness for companies to keep both concepts in mind simultaneously. Regarding the whole value chain, a company can reach a higher aggregated level of know-how transfer if it integrates not only its customers but its suppliers as well. This maximizes the possible exploitation of the business partners’ experiences, know how and innovation potential along the supply chain. By using for example a supplier’s greater design responsibilities in addition to the direct integration of the customer, companies can develop and maintain a competitive advantage by reducing costs and cycle time and by offering more customized product characteristics or better product quality (Fließ and Becker, 2006; Piller, Moeslein and Stotko, 2004). One could argue therefore that supplier integration is essential in the context of a consequent customer orientation as the incorporation of the supplier’s know-how and his experiences redound to the customer’s advantage if used correctly.

The paper is structured in the following way: First, we will discuss the definitions of customer and supplier integration. Then we give an overview of the paradigmatic development of the purchasing paradigms as theoretical background. The main section of the paper deals with the future research questions according to the management tasks design, controlling and development of business relationships. We knowingly choose a management oriented framework of customer and supplier integra-

tion as – in the long run – the practice has to be provided with concrete management instruments. Finally, we develop a dynamic model of customer and supplier integration as a basis for the deduction of hypotheses. We think that taking a closer analytical look at supplier and customer integration helps developing the concept of “Total Relationship Marketing” (Gummesson, 1999) further.

2. DEFINITIONS

We define customer integration and supplier integration as the customer’s/supplier’s participation in specification, production, delivery and marketing of products and/or services (in the following we use the term product only). Customer and supplier integration can appear in three different forms:

- **Customer integration and supplier integration by ‘information’.** The customer provides the producer with the information that is necessary to find the suitable product or even to develop the product in cooperation with the customer (standardised versus individualised). An example is the configuration of printed circuits boards, e.g. for the (remote) control of industrial plants and devices. The customer has to provide the manufacturer respectively the developers with information about his problem and the intended solution. The exchange of information can be mutual as the manufacturer of the electronic devices can bring in his experiences from former projects with the same or other customers. This can lead to co-specialised assets in the form of knowledge generation – client-side and supplier-side.
- **Customer integration and supplier integration by ‘objects’.** The customer provides the object that is needed within the production process, like the machine that has to be repaired or the real estate on which a building will be put up. Another example is the plastic working industry: The customer provides the manufacturer with plastics which then is melted and formed in the extruders of the manufacturer (supplier). If the supplier provides the basic materials in accordance to the customer’s specifications this can be denoted as ‘supplier integration by objects’.
- **Customer integration and supplier integration by ‘activities’.** Here, the division of labour between customer and supplier is rearranged: The customer takes over parts of the value-added process. He can for example provide the building plan of computer chips or he develops a software program in cooperation with the manufacturer, which would both be customer integration in the front end of the production process. The implementation of software solutions or the pick up of a machine by the customer are examples for customer integration in the back of the process. In case the customer has to provide the needed object – like special electronic components – and he is not able to purchase it as the components have become scarce but the supplier is able to purchase the needed components due to his negotiation power or because he works together closely with brokers who can purchase the components, this would be supplier integration by activities.

It is easy to see that a co-operation between buyer and seller in the form of integration must lead to a rearrangement of the organisational structures and processes of the parties involved. Concerning activities, Håkansson and Snehota (1995) name the adaptation of production and delivery schemas, the timing of the product development and the way information is exchanged. According to their concept of activity links, the supplier’s and the customer’s activities – transformation as well as interaction activities – are adjusted in business relationships.

This is one component of the definition of integration followed by the IMP Group. Here, integration is seen as a “useful way of understanding what closeness really means in a relationship” (Ford et al., 1998, p. 131). Besides the amount of co-ordination of the activities of the involved companies – as just mentioned – , the extent of integration is defined as the extent of the adaptation of the companies’ resources to each other and the level of interaction between the actors involved (Ford et al., 1998; Håkansson/Snehota 1995).

First of all, it is necessary to clarify the relation between customer and supplier integration – on a conceptual as well as on a procedural basis:

- Regarding the two conceptualisations of integration named above it would be fruitful to investigate whether a connection of both would lead to a gain of insight.
- Another conceptual question would be when to use the term ‘supplier integration’ and when ‘customer integration’ as always both parties are involved. We suggest terming it in dependence of the knowledge and information edge: The party who has more knowledge and infor-

mation integrates the less involved party. But this is surely a question that can be put up for discussion. Another possibility would be to term it in dependence of who is proactive: Then the party who takes the initiative could be denoted as the active, integrating party.

Two questions of procedural character are the following:

- Does customer integration lead to supplier integration and vice versa and if so, how does the process develop in practice?
- Supplier and customer integration underlie a hierarchy of integration intensity: The integration intensity is lowest with the provision of objects, increases with the exchange of information between buyer and seller and reaches its peak with the taking over of activities in the production process by the customer respectively the supplier. It would be interesting to find out whether the three forms occur in a process with a fixed succession of the process steps 'object', 'information', 'activity' or if it is rather a modular construction system from which single components can be chosen and can then be arranged.

3. PARADIGMATIC DEVELOPMENT AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are two basic factors for characterizing the paradigmatic development of exchanges between buyers and sellers on business-to-business-markets. First, the direction of influence and accordingly the number of parties to which one concedes the power of influence. This is mirrored by the one-sided, the bilateral and the multilateral view and the corresponding approaches. The second distinctive feature is whether the object of investigation is only one transaction or a series of transactions which can then be referred to as relationship, supply chain or as network (figure 2). From SOR to the network approach, there was originally a so called "snapshot-orientation" (Roemer, 2006). But the possibility of multilateral influencing was already a basic assumption of the interaction approach (Håkansson, 1982) as well as of the network approach (Gummesson, 2004; Mattsson, 2004) which means that the customer is no longer seen as a passive buyer who only responds to certain stimuli. The two last named approaches have even been advanced towards a more relationship-oriented perspective over time. The relationship orientation can be characterized as incorporating both: a multilateral perspective and the assumption of "a series of market transactions between buyer and seller that is not coincidental" (Plinke, 1997, p. 23).

It is important to mention that we do not argue that customer and supplier integration is a "cure-all" for every possible relationship. We emphasise that it is a case-to-case decision (Jaworski and Kohli, 2006) – just like the decision for a position on the transaction-relationship continuum (Webster, 1992). To the relationships and networks in which these two mechanisms are used we refer to as "integrative relationships" and "integrative networks". They are the focus of this paper as shown in the lower part of figure 2. We set our focus on long-term business relationships and networks rather than on transactions as the transactional perspective has been investigated to a bigger extent up to now, e.g. in the context of project management (e.g. Brown and Eisenhardt, 1995; Perks, 2005; Petersen, Handfield and Ragatz, 2003). Besides, we assume that supplier and customer integration can display its competitive power to a higher degree in long-term relationships and networks.

We follow Gummesson's understanding of relationship marketing as relationships, networks and interaction and we encourage to add supply chains (1999). To include the different levels of aggregation of a company's relationship conglomerate is essential to satisfy its complexity and multi-level character, as it is specific in business-to-business-markets (as shown for example by Mentzer, 2004).

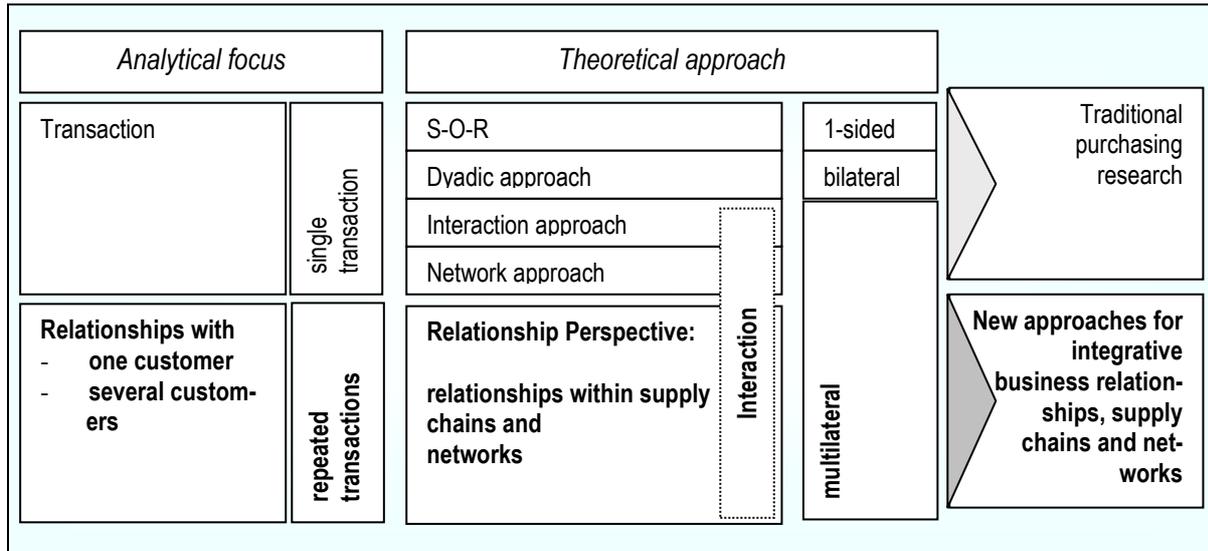


Figure 2: Paradigmatic development regarding buying/purchasing on business-to-business markets

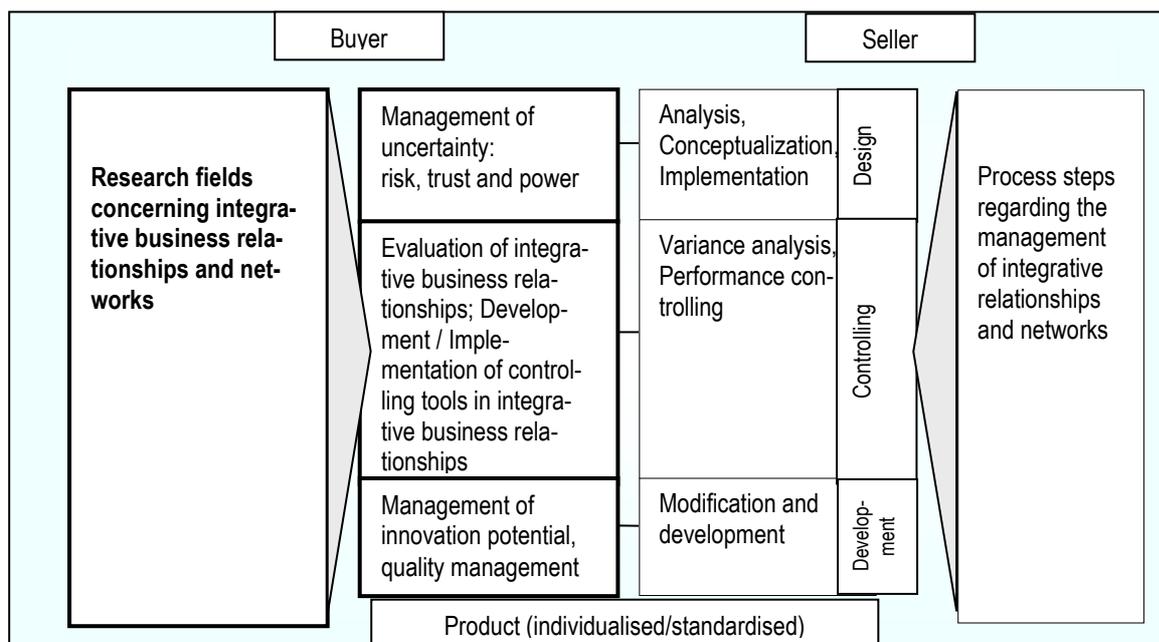


Figure 3: Fields of future research in a managerial context

In the form of the process-oriented framework in figure 3 we show three relevant research aspects in connexion with customer and supplier integration which we identified on the basis of a literature review:

1. Design aspects: It has to be decided explicitly or implicitly if the relationship is coordinated by trust or by power. Under which circumstances which form occurs is an important question to answer.
2. Controlling aspects: It has to be evaluated if the chosen coordination form does lead to a sufficient outcome for the business partners involved. Here, we discuss the necessary features of an adequate controlling instrument for integrative relationships.
3. Development aspects: The identified necessary changes have to be realised. Possible ways to overcome the status quo have to be discovered. Here, we lay the focus on the role of the innovation potential of business relationships.

It is assumed that three factors influence the design, controlling and development of business relationships: the predispositions of buyer and seller and the type of product and/or service exchanged. We take a closer look at the people involved as they are the organisms which process stimuli like information and rather tacit elements like the atmosphere between the business partners and are thus the key to successful business relationships.

In the following, we will discuss each research field separately and will then develop a dynamic model of customer and supplier integration as an intermediary result.

4. MANAGEMENT OF UNCERTAINTY IN INTEGRATIVE RELATIONSHIPS – POWER VERSUS TRUST

Where people come together to do business, uncertainty about the business partner's behaviour occurs. This results from the fact that no reaction functions exist from which the involved parties can read off the partner's future actions – as it is assumed in micro-economic theory. Therefore, relationships always have a negotiation character (Wagner, 1982). Above all in the initiation phase of integrative exchanges in which is decided whether a contract will be concluded or not, the risk of wrong decisions because of limited and uncertain knowledge of the world (Hirshleifer and Riley, 1979) is very high for both, buyer and seller (Fließ and Jacob 1996). The buyer can not be sure about the seller's ability to fulfil his expectations regarding quality and production schedule. The buyer also faces the danger that the manufacturer takes his information and ideas and becomes a seller of the respective product himself. The seller, on the other hand, loses parts of his control as the customer now has a voice in the production process but can not directly be hold responsible for the result of the process (Kleinaltenkamp, 1993).

To handle this uncertainty, relationships can be coordinated by power or trust. According to Williamson (1990) hierarchy was seen long time as the only way to handle uncertainty – which can be seen as a form of institutionalised power. Relationships as a hybrid form between market and hierarchy were not seen as successful coordination mechanisms. In an advanced view of the transaction theory however, relationships are also seen as adequate means for coordination, but only under the condition of trust as then the possibility of opportunism is small (Picot, Reichwald and Wigand, 2001; Sydow, 2001; Pieper, 2000; Vogt, 1997).

But it is of high importance to mention here that not every business relationship – not even a close relationship – is automatically characterised by trust, friendliness and co-operation, as there are always also conflicts to solve (Ford et al., 1998). This is for example supported by Humphrey and Ashforth (2000). Therefore, Ford et al. (1998) as well as Håkansson and Snehota (1995) define close relationships not as being trustful and friendly but in terms of the extent of integration of resources, activities and actors as shown above. But if closeness does not mean trust but integration, this would imply that also integration does not come along automatically with trust. If closeness and integration does not automatically mean trust, it would be interesting to find out under which circumstances trust is developed in integrative relationships and when power – as kind of antipole to trust – is used and how trust and power are influenced by the other – above all in the course of a business relationship. Another question would be which topics are rather solved hierarchically and which one rather in a trustful and friendly manner.

This theme is treated differently in literature. Some authors come to the conclusion that it is not even reasonable trying to organise each relationship in a collaborative manner (Cox et al., 2003). Subject to different circumstances of power it can be more successful to follow a transactional and/or arm's length approach.¹ The authors suggest that collaboration should not be considered as best-practice. But this implies that the authors does not consider it reasonable to change the status quo and does therefore not suggest instruments to change the distribution of power between the parties involved. Buvik and Haugland (2005), on the other hand, suggest the development of relational norms instead of contractual safeguards to coordinate business relationships. As one relational norm, they propose trust. Meanwhile, terms like trust, relational and social norms are often an integral part of the conceptualisation of relationships (Roemer, 2006; Flint and Mentzer, 2006). Dyer and Chu (2003) even regard trust as a “unique governance mechanism” as it does not only reduce transaction costs but leads to a higher degree of information exchange as well. This is opposed to Luhmann's view (1973)

¹ For a quantitative customer valuation model that takes into account the distribution of dependence between partners in business-to-business relationships see Roemer (2006).

who describes trust rather as a substitute for information than as a strengthener of information exchange. A commonality between different authors is that they see trust as something that poses as a norm or rule within relationships respectively something that gives structure to a relationship (Luhmann, 1973; Fukuyama, 1995).

Concerning networks the diffusion of trust would be an interesting aspect to be investigated. A network can be defined as an organisational form which consists of different interconnected relationships and which will only keep together as long as the network logic is accepted by enough actors: "Change in the substance of any of the relationships affects the overall structure." (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). It could be investigated if changes in the power-trust constellation within one integrative relationship cause a chain reaction throughout the whole network.

We consider the further understanding of trust within integrative relationships and networks as very important as the performance-enhancing effect of trust is widely recognized in literature (e.g. Bouncken, 2000; Flint and Mentzer, 2006). This is also supported by Fukuyama (1997), even though on a macro-economic level. He shows that a nation's well-being and its ability to compete, depends on the level of trust inherent in the society but he also gives examples that show the correlation between trust and success for companies.

Concerning trust, the following research fields can be identified:

- Under which circumstances is power and under which circumstances is trust used as a coordination instrument in business relationships? And how do both mechanisms influence each other?
- Does integration lead to more trust in the course of time and reduces therefore the perceived risk (Enkel, Perez-Frejje and Gassmann, 2005) in business relationships and, if so, under which conditions does this occur?
- Are there constellations under which the use of power leads to higher efficiency and effectiveness of integrative business relationships than trust?
- Which consequences have changes in the trust-power-constellation within one integrative relationship for the whole network?

5. THE VALUATION OF BUYER-SELLER RELATIONSHIPS

It is inevitable to value the current and future business relationships if one wants to choose good business partners (Spekman, 1988). It is aimed at ensuring the efficiency – respectively at protecting the cost structures of a business – and the effectiveness of relationships. Even in the course of increasing customer integration, valuation of relationships is an important issue companies should draw their attention to: On the one hand, buyers and sellers work together more closely in early design and development phases (Biermann, 2000) to reduce costs. But on the other hand, suppliers run the risk of being responsive to every wish of the customer (effectiveness) without taking into account profitability (efficiency) (Fließ and Jacob, 1996). The buyer on the other hand has to value whether his needs are satisfied to an adequate degree. Benefits and costs have to be contrasted to appraise a relationship (Günter and Helm, 2004). The following three issues can be identified as starting points for future research concerning valuation of relationships:

- **Dynamics of relationships:** The value of a relationship can not be assessed in an exhausting way at a single point in time "as costs and benefits of relationships are cumulative over the life of that relationship" (Ford et al., 1998, p. 117). Longitudinal analysis will be necessary to satisfy the changing intensity of customer and supplier integration in the course of a relationship as well as the variation in the distribution of dependence (Roemer, 2006). Eggert, Ulaga and Schultz (2006) present a dynamic model for the valuation of relationships. But a limitation of the approach is that only the benefits are assessed. Costs remain unconsidered.
- **Multilateral character of relationships:** Ford et al. (1982) not only emphasise the importance of taking into account relational costs and relational benefits simultaneously. They also underline that costs and revenues of all companies involved are affected and have to be calculated. What makes the assessment even more difficult is the fact that the value of a relationship can only be determined in relation to the whole company's relationship portfolio which is reflected by the idea of networks (Mattsson, 2004)². This requires a valuation of every single

² Thibaut and Kelley (1959) state the same in the context of the evaluation of relationship dyads.

relationship of the buyer and the seller from transactional to relational – including customer and supplier integration.

- **Qualitative character of influencing factors:** The complexity of the valuation process is increased due to the existence of a series of qualitative factors. This still bears a challenge for science and practice as most of the valuation models do not include instructions how to cope with the qualitative aspects, the so called soft factors, of relationships. Trust, social bonds and closeness are named as such (Roemer, 2006). Customer and supplier integration can be added to this list of soft factors that need to be quantified. Their consideration is inevitable as the integration of business partners in the value-creation process is not only a cost-driver but a source of cost-saving potential as well (Normann and Ramírez, 1993), though many firms are still unaware of this potential or are afraid of the fundamental changes a “customer-centric approach” would entail (Kumar, Lemon and Parasuraman, 2006, p. 89). The same would be true for a supplier-centric approach on the part of the customer. Piller, Moeslein and Stotko (2004) refer to this cost-saving potential as “economies of integration”. In a first step, a quantification necessitates the identification of the single dimensions of the two constructs. This has not been accomplished so far. Starting points concerning criteria for measuring supplier integration are provided by Fließ and Becker (2006). Jacob (2006) presents a conceptualisation of customer integration competence defined as ability to integrate the customer into the production process of customized goods and services.

The assessment of relationships also permits to decide whether a transactional coordination could be cheaper than a relational coordination. Companies should discuss continually which business relationships to invest in further and which relationships to keep on a transactional level (Lindgreen et al., 2006). This will lead to the dynamic management of a portfolio of relationships which differ in closeness between buyer and seller. But buyers and sellers have to take another dimension into account: that is to say whether they search partners on a national or international basis. Here, cultural aspects have to be included into the valuation as well (Theile, 2004). The combination of both decision dimensions will lead to a multiplicity of possible relationship forms and intensities.

In summary, the need can be identified to develop an assessment tool for integrative customer and supplier relationships

- that is able to assess the relationship value dynamically,
- that integrates the view of the buyer and the seller,
- and that is able to measure soft and cultural factors in relationships.

6. MANAGEMENT OF INNOVATION POTENTIAL

In the course on their concentration on core competencies, many companies source out their production which is widely denoted as lean management. Thereby, the purchasing function gains a higher importance. Bergmann and Daub (2006) argue that this “slimming craze” would lead to a loss of competences and resources which are essential for important changes and innovations within the organisation. Oftentimes, the necessity for changes even remains unrecognised in such a slim organisation. According to the authors, the lean-theory has rather led to a paralysed replication of the old structures. Our argument now is that customer and supplier integration can compensate for the possible loss in innovation ability. This is indicated by the study of Panayides and So (2005). The authors examine the effect of the relationship-orientation along the supply chain. Their focus is on relationships between logistics service providers and their clients. They could corroborate their hypothesis that relationship orientation has a positive effect on key organisational capabilities, like organisational learning and innovation and that it improves the supply chain effectiveness and performance. As services are characterised by the integration of the customer – denoted as external factor (Engelhardt and Freiling, 1995) – the study of Panayides and So is at least an affirmation of our view of customer and supplier integration as a means of compensation in the services sector. A replication of the study is surely necessary for the product sector. Furthermore, the authors indicate that their data collection was limited to the logistics service providers. A collection of data from the client’s side would be necessary.

The question comes up how a positive correlation between customer/supplier integration and the innovation ability of the involved companies can be exploited. This is a rather pragmatic point of view. The companies have to be disposed of adequate instruments to establish customer and supplier

integration successfully. A central promising instrument would be the institutionalisation of information exchange (Panayides and So, 2005). Kotabe, Martin and Domoto (2003) found a positive correlation between the extent of knowledge and information transfer between buyer and seller and the seller's performance. Similarly, one could presume a positive correlation between the extent of knowledge and information transfer and the extent of the companies' innovation ability – which also can be seen as a dimension of performance. Information exchange is closely connected with learning and the accumulation of knowledge. Flint and Mentzer (2006) see knowledge as the fundamental source for a competitive advantage and emphasize among other things the role of knowledge about processes like co-production and innovation with business customers and the role of knowledge about processes for building up a network of firms around the world to develop efficient and effective supply chains. In their view, through the continual sharing of information, knowledge is co-produced in integrated value chain management because “multiple minds across several firms exchange perspectives and share skills”. The authors denote the process of knowledge generation as supply chain learning.

The study by Tollin (2002) shows that integrating customers in itself is a learning process – a process that requires certain assets like knowledge, values, relationships and “intelligence about customers”. Referring to van Aken and Weggeman (2000), Tollin underlines the necessity to initiate studies about the way relationships to external learning partners are developed and created. This will be of value regarding the generation of concrete instructions for the design of integrative relationships with customers and suppliers (Reichwald, Ihl and Seifert, 2005). As a field-tested instrument for the creation of an innovative atmosphere Bergmann and Daub (2006) present the “Solution Cycle” which comprises different phases of analysis and learning. The application of this instrument to integrative business relationships seems to be promising. As a concrete concept, above all for the sharing of sensitive information, Lamming et al. (2005) suggest the concept of “jointly managed transparency”.

Enkel, Perez-Freije and Gassmann (2005) found out that it depends on the appropriate point in time the customer is integrated whether customer integration leads to success or not. The authors suggest a multi-stage approach of integration – as also Beitz (1996) and Gales and Mansour-Cole do (1995) in connexion with customer integration and Boudling et al. (2005) do in connexion with customer relationship management – and assign different customer types to the different stages. The dynamic component “learning” is included in most of the studies mentioned above. It is a highly necessary activity to implement and live customer and supplier integration successfully. But it is also important to keep the following in mind: “*Decision-makers learn in the sense of changing how they look at the world, but their ways of looking at the world may limit their ability to change how they see things.*” (Earl 2005, p. 915). A self-critical reflection as well as reflection by colleagues and superiors – as far as possible and accepted – is therefore inevitable.

What future research may investigate is not whether customer and supplier integration actually can enhance the innovation potential of the buyer and the seller, as this is already recognized by theory. What is needed are concrete instruments that help the practice to apply the factors, processes and methods described in theory (Enkel, Perez-Freije and Gassmann, 2005). Also, it would be important to learn more about the prerequisites for establishing integrative relationships (Tollin, 2002). In this context, it will be illuminative to get granular on the personal attributes of the buyers and sellers as well as the characteristics of the product. This will be treated in the next section.

7. INDIVIDUAL FACTORS OF BUYER AND SELLER AND PRODUCT CHARACTERISTICS

Much to their surprise Mentzer, Foggin and Golicic (2000) find out in their study, that many of the enablers of collaboration identified along the supply chain, are related to people and personal interaction and not to technology and infrastructure. This view is reflected by the conceptual model delineating factors that affect the intensity of customer involvement with the firm of Kalaignanam and Varadarajan (2006). As the three influencing factors they identify market and customer characteristics, firm characteristics and product characteristics. We will follow this broad categorization but will look at them from a different angle. Kalaignanam and Varadarajan by themselves recognize the necessity for exploring the psychological processes which affect customers when they contribute to a greater extent to the production of the good or service. Earl (2005) takes up the same position. He is an agent of the psychological economics which seeks to use inputs from psychology to get a better understanding and a better ability to predict behaviour that has been explicated hitherto from an economic standpoint only. This is the aspect on which we will put the focus in this paper. We divide the psychological view

into a cognitive and an emotional section. Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000, p. 330) allude to “customer intimacy” in connexion with cognitions and emotions in the relationship between buyer and seller. We underline the necessity not to look exclusively at the corresponding predispositions and processes of the buyer but at those of the seller as well.

Cognitive structures

Our first basic assumption is that business people are not automatically rational and selfish. We thereby follow one of the axiomatic foundations of the psychological economics as defined by Earl (2005). This view is also shared by Mentzer, Foggin and Golicic (2000) who identified a give-and-take mentality within the companies in the supply chain as a key factor of success “to achieve the greater good for the whole” (similarly Boulding et al., 2005; they use the term “consumer fairness”). The demand for an altruistic behaviour for achieving a better understanding of economic processes, better economic outcomes and a higher quality of life is as well made clear by the Buddhist economic approach (Prayukvong, 2005). This approach suggests that by following the Buddhist path of enlightenment consisting of the three successive main groups ‘wisdom’, ‘perception’ and ‘concentration’, companies can reach a certain economic goal while being balanced with nature and the needs of society at the same time. ‘Right understanding’ is seen as the first necessary step to gain wisdom and is influenced by the social and the human capital of the company. The company’s social capital is described as the beneficial information a company obtains from others (the “good friends”) in society. This is an external factor. The human capital, as an internal factor, is defined as ‘training in analytical thinking’. If the employees have the ability to analyse cause and effect from all situations they will get to know the true promise of what Buddhists call positive thinking. This ability is seen as a crucial foundation for developing other skills that are essential to gain economic success, like all sorts of managerial skills.

The role of thinking has been left widely unappreciated in economic research so far. Useful findings are provided by the quantum physics. Studies in this research field show that our expectations and attitude determine what becomes manifest in our life. Up to now, most studies have been conducted in the medical sector – these studies show that the way people think about their state of health is reflected in illness or well-being (Jahn and Dunne, 1987; Nelson et al., 1996) – and in the range of human-machine-interaction and human-microbe-interaction (Dunne and Jahn, 1992; Pleass and Dean, 1990; Nash, 1984). In the latter case, studies show that people are able to influence the direction into which globes and coins fall that are spit out at random by a gambling machine. The fact that results are influenced by what people think is also shown by Borsook and Becerra (2005). The authors show how findings about the placebo effect that has been proven evident for the health domain, could be applied to the economic sector. It would be interesting to investigate whether the *ex ante* way of thinking and the expectations of business partners influence the outcomes of negotiations. This would indicate that already in the course of employee selection, importance should be attached to the cognitive structures of the applicants and that the staff should be subjected to a training in positive and purposeful thinking. This could of course fall on deaf ears with employees who are not fundamentally open for such rather spiritual paths. It would be another challenge to break down such barriers of thinking.

It would also be fruitful to integrate findings from the field of energy research. According to Thayer (2001), there exist four fundamental energy-states concerning pressure/relaxation a person can undergo in the course of a day. With “calm energy” he denotes the state in which people are mentally open, flexible, self-confident, highly-motivated and in which they can form clear thoughts. In this condition it is most probable to get into “flow” (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). It would be interesting to investigate whether negotiations aiming at customer/supplier integration lead to better results when the involved people are in this state of mind.

Emotional abilities

The emotional competence of the employees plays an important role as well. Goleman (1995) assumes a positive effect of emotional intelligence on the cost-efficiency of companies – “an idea for business, one some managers may find hard to accept” (p. 149). He also talks of “managing with heart” (p. 148). As an example for the absence of emotional intelligence he takes a plane crash that only occurred due to the fear of the co-pilots to criticise the pilots decision how to handle a problem with the landing

gear. Their fear of the possible pilot's wrath restrained them from coming forward with proposals that possibly could have prevented the plane crash. As one dimension of emotional intelligence, Goleman names the ability to know how the other feels for which he uses the term 'empathy'. According to the author this ability is highly advantageous in all areas of life, from romance over sales and management to political action and it comprises among other things the skill to interpret the tone of voice and the facial expression of others. One critical prerequisite for having compassion with others would be of course the ability of listening carefully to one's counterpart. The ability of "active listening" is named by Schulte (1996, p. 279) as a precondition for a successful establishment of customer integration.

In this context, studies from parapsychology are very interesting. It is shown that depending on the mood of a person A (e.g. if he or she is angry, happy or excited) who thinks about a person B, person B receives corresponding physiological impulses (Goleman, 2006; Radin, Taylor and Braud, 1995; Radin, 1996; see also Hirasawam, Kawano and Furukawa, 1966). For successful integrative relationships it would therefore be important, on the one hand, to feel with others respectively to read the signs in their faces for example and, on the other hand, to cultivate positive feelings and expectations towards the business partner as he would anticipate disharmonies otherwise. This surely requires extensive training measures to make sure the employees transmit positive vibrations. Much research has to be conducted in this area. Results and insights from (para-)psychology should be used as basis in this connexion. A framework would be eligible in which thoughts and ideas about cognitive and emotional aspects are integrated. This framework could then be denoted as "positive frequency concept".

Product characteristics

We assume that the product characteristics have a direct impact on the intensity of integrative relationships. As a first basic distinction, we suggest the dichotomy 'standardised versus individualised product' (see also Klostermann, Beilharz and Dresselhaus, 2006). Another denotation would be that of customized products versus non-customized products. Ghosh, Dutta and Stremersch (2006) investigate when the vendor should control the customisation process in dependence on increasing technological unpredictability and decreasing modularity and customer knowledge. In a similar way, the relation between the extent of individualisation/standardisation and intensity of customer respectively supplier integration should be investigated. The list of product characteristics can be continued. Other dichotomous pairs of characteristics are suggested by Kalaignanam and Varadarajan (2006).

8. A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

In the following, we present a possible model consisting of the components discussed above. We would like to incite other researchers to develop this model further and to deduce hypotheses in a next step.

We postulate the following functional chain (see figure 4): The fundamental idea of this model is that the interplay of the basic modules 'buyer', 'seller' and 'product' will create different forms of coordination, determined by the psychological predispositions – for example by different forms of risk perception (Jeker, 2002) – and the corporate culture. Thereby, it is determined whether a company, respectively its employees, rather negotiate in a trustful and friendly manner (denoted as "the altruists" in the following) or in an aggressive and suspicious way (denoted as the "suspicious" in the following). This depends for the most part on the fundamental concept of human being. It can be assumed that the altruists tend to use trust as coordination mechanisms in relationships and the suspicious, on the other hand, power.

It is further postulated that an integrative corporate culture leads to a higher intensity of learning and a higher degree of accumulated knowledge. Like Bergmann and Daub (2006) and Hunt and Madhavaram (2006), we see knowledge as a key success driver for the performance of companies. Thus, a major and dynamic knowledge base will influence the quality of relationships positively. We define quality in analogy to the satisfaction literature. There, satisfaction means that the expectations about the performance of the company (the product or service) have been exceeded (Oliver, 1997). Regarding the quality of business relationships, we propose to define quality in the matter of the cumulative innovation potential and knowledge base of the companies involved in a relationship and the value of the relationship. If innovation potential, knowledge base and value are higher than expected before

having established the relationship/network, one could allude to high quality and vice versa. For the measurement of value, there are different categories of modelling (for an overview see Gupta et al., 2006). Roughly, one can distinguish quantitative and qualitative oriented models. As it is impossible for any single article to cover all themes, as Gupta et al. (2006) note, we decide to concentrate on the attitudinal measure ‘satisfaction with the relationship/network’, although problems with measuring can occur (Mazursky and Geva, 1989). But it is one of the most crucial factors why people stay in relationships (Rusbult, 1980).

The quality of the relationship or network in turn has a positive influence on the competitive position of the involved companies. In the end, we assume a feedback loop, or also learning loop, as Hunt and Morgan (1996) do in their Resource-Advantage Theory. We assume that a company’s recognition, that it is in an unfavourable competitive position relative to its competitors, will have a direct feedback on the employees and finally the corporate culture. Potentially, the employees recognize the necessity of becoming more open and trustful. Then they will leave old paths and create new ones as is the idea of idea of path creation as an extension of the theory of path dependency (Schreyögg, Sydow and Koch, 2003). According to Steinmann and Schreyögg (2002), we presume that changes in attitude and behaviour can easier be achieved in weak corporate cultures than in strong ones.

The number of exchanges that form the relationship may also have an influence on the degree of openness of the employees. On the basis of several studies, Altman and Taylor (1973) conclude that people’s openness (e.g. in terms of level of intimacy of exchange, number of things told about themselves) in the course of a relationship is a function of (dis-)satisfaction experienced in interpersonal exchange and that “social penetration processes” grow faster during early or middle, rather than later stages of development – “suggesting an overall negatively accelerated curve” (p. 44). These studies surely have to be replicated in the context of customer and supplier integration. When one sees the circuit in figure 4 as what happens during one exchange, it can be assumed that the business partners reveal more information with an increasing number of exchanges. But as mentioned already in connexion with trust – for fear of too much dependency – also the opposite is possible. Under which circumstances and on which level which behaviour occurs in the course of customer/supplier integration would be worthwhile investigating. This would ideally lead to a relationship-curve which shows phases of closeness and of distance and thereby provides starting points reacting with measures of rapprochement.

A particular challenge for the research design in general will be the regard of the multi-stage character of supply chains (Trommen, 2001) and the multiplicity of linkages within a network (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

9. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have revealed constructs we consider relevant for a deeper penetration of the customer and supplier integration constructs in the context of relationships, supply chains and networks. Both constructs are already considered as performance-enhancing measures in the course of market exchanges, but mostly in a snapshot-view up to now. We recognized that customer and supplier integration is already inherent to different instruments of relationship marketing and think that it is time to integrate findings from the relationship marketing literature with those already existing in the context of customer and supplier integration to establish both constructs as a standard within relationship marketing. We guess that in the end a standard continuum will emerge with the relationship’s intensity as possible dimension.

We used a managerial model to arrange the constructs – consisting of management of uncertainty, evaluation of relationships/supply chains/networks and their innovation potential to make clear the necessity to provide the practice with a kind of tool-kit for the implementation of the integrative methods; a tool-kit that is still missing when one looks at the rather imprecise definitions of relationship marketing. As influencing factors, we emphasise the role of the psychological predispositions of the buyer and seller, the corporate culture and the product characteristics. We thereby underline the fact that customer and supplier integration can not be implemented successfully without the willingness of the involved employees. We do not presume the hundred percent rational economic man who also acts opportunistically to achieve his goal of profit maximization, but allow for an altruistic view of people doing business. Such an approach comes up to employees who do not think always in a ra-

tional and positive way and are humans who feel. Thinking and feeling may both have a significant influence on the outcomes of negotiations, informal conversations and the integrative relationship as a whole. This should be considered in theory as well as in practice with adequate employee selection and training. Finally, we proposed a dynamic supplier and customer integration model for discussion. The generating of concrete hypotheses and their testing may reveal causal linkages between the considered constructs and thus may guide business partners to a successful implementation of customer and supplier integration.

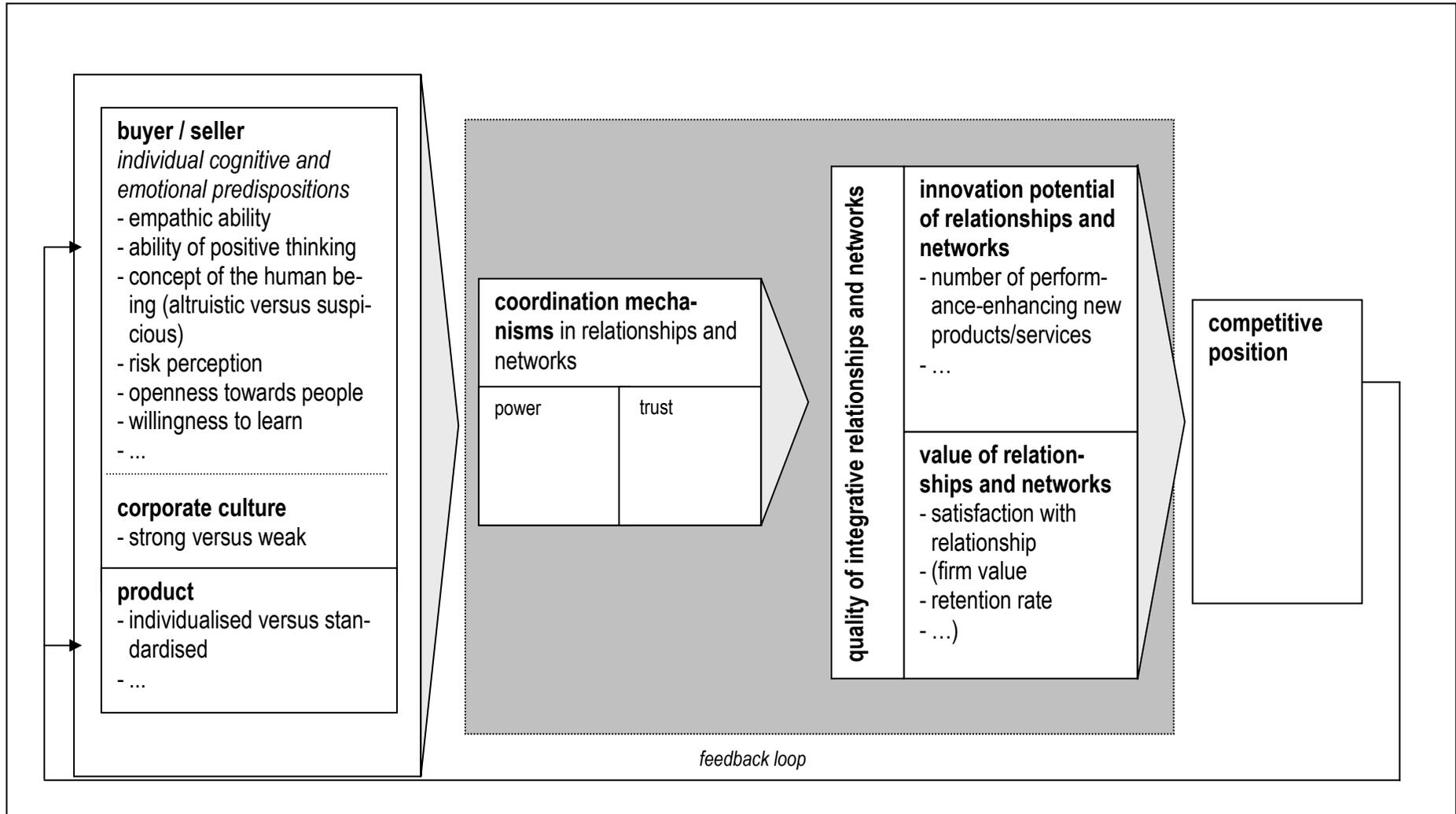


Figure 4: Dynamic supplier and customer integration model

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