

## **Some Common Issues on Business to Business Marketing Organization Confronted to Empirical Evidence**

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*The present communication enlarges the perspective by providing empirical evidence (or non evidence) to certain theoretical assumptions commonly raised in the narrow field of marketing organization.*

*The research is based on a survey among marketing and sales executives and managers (n = 203) and enlightens the following questions usually raised about the marketing organization: 1) is marketing still done in "marketing departments"? 2) what are the core marketing activities? 3) What is the power of marketing? 4) What about the degree of centralization, standardization, formalization and specialization of marketing? and finally 5) what are the trends in the evolution of the marketing organization.*

**Keywords:** Marketing organization, structure, trends, research

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### 1. Introduction

About 30 years ago, Hakansson *et al.* stated that "*the most important competitive mean in industrial marketing is the organizational design of the marketing function*" (Hakansson, Wootz Andersson and Hangard, 1979, p. 81). Day (1997) echoed to this statement by stressing that organization issues were rising to the "*top of the agenda on the future of marketing*".

Looking at the literature on industrial marketing, one can observe that authors contributing from the IMP group's vantage point have made valuable contributions to how dyads or networks organize. They have analyzed a multitude of facets of business relationships studying interactions in terms of actors, activities and resources. However, the question of how some of the central actors in dyads and networks (i.e. companies) organize *internally* in order to participate in exchange relationships has received little attention.

On a more general basis – not only in the IMP literature and not only in the BtoB marketing literature – research on the topic of marketing organization remains scarce (Harris and Ogbonna, 2003; Moller and Rajala, 1999).

All this is all the more intriguing that marketing organization has often times been described as a *condition* of firm performance, whether as a means for strategy implementation (Slater and Olson, 2000; Vorhies and Morgan, 2003; Walker and Ruekert, 1987) or as a *full* dimension of marketing strategy (Hakansson and Ostberg, 1975).

The purpose of this communication is to contribute to the literature on marketing organization by analyzing the way how industrial firms currently implement their marketing activities. We present the results of a cross-sectional survey conducted among French firms during 2006/07.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we'll attempt to define what exactly is the topic of "marketing organization". Then, we will introduce our empirical study by providing details on our methodology. The results of our empirical study will then allow drawing a picture of the current marketing organization in industrial firms in France. We will discuss those aspects contrasting them with common assumption usually found in the literature. A contingency view of the issue will also be presented and discussed.

### 2. What is "marketing organization"?

There is a broad stream of literature discussing the design of marketing strategies and instruments, their potential impact on objectives, as well as moderators and antecedents. Considerably less research has focused on marketing implementation. However, in practical application, many strategies and instruments do not produce the impact posited by underlying theories or models. Often the effects yielded are not attained because of inadequate execution (e.g. Rayport and Jaworski, 2004; Simon, 2004; Wirth and Dietrich, 2004). The disappointment of many companies with the introduction of CRM systems is one example among others (e.g. Rigby and Ledingham, 2004; Wilson, Daniel and McDonald, 2002). Another fundamental problem in marketing management is the lack of organizational homogeneity (Webster, 2005a). Whereas standard textbooks usually present marketing as a monolithic task, in most organizations "marketing" is a fragmented phenomenon and performed by numerous organizational units, e.g. in departments such as sales, product management, market research or communication. It is rarely structured within one single functional unit (Krohmer, Homburg and Workman, 2002), and is often separated by important hierarchical, geographical, cultural, or other barriers (see e.g. Borgas, Muehlmeier and Zupancic,

2004). In an empirical study, Diller and Saatkamp (2002) identify a broad range of problems caused by a lack of coordination across marketing interfaces. In an Accenture survey of marketing executives in the US and the UK, 57% of the respondents reported that their marketing campaigns are not well integrated and coordinated with other areas of their companies, particularly IT and CRM (Merrihue, 2002). In addition to cross-functional dispersion, several authors report a trend towards an upgrading of corporate market orientation while marketing departments become simultaneously downsized (e.g. Greyser, 1997; Webster, 2005b). With decreasing concentration of marketing activities inside single units, coordination of market-directed activities becomes of paramount importance in order to provide superior value to customers. Getting close to the customer is "a journey the whole organization needs to make" (Gulati and Oldroyd, 2005).

Accordingly, there is increasing interest in the requirements of successful marketing implementation and particularly the structures required and the activities (types, sequences, etc.) that need to be carried out (Bonoma, 1985; Hilker, 1995). For example, Piercy (1998) argues that a view of implementation that clarifies the underlying organizational factors required to build marketing implementation capabilities is helpful.

From a general standpoint, the topic of marketing organization can be described, following Workman et al. (1998) as the issue which fundamentally addresses "*the allocation of activities to groups*" (Workman, Homburg and Gruner, 1998).

Most of the research works describe marketing organization along two perspectives (Achrol 1991, 1997; Achrol and Kotler, 1999; Ruekert, Walker and Roering, 1985; Workman, Homburg and Gruner, 1998).

- The first perspective is a *functional group perspective* (which considers marketing as a functional group within the organization).
- The second perspective is an *activity-based perspective* which considers the marketing organization as a set of activities. Part of this research stream is also the emerging literature on a process oriented view of marketing (e.g. Diller and Ivens 2006).

More developed is the view from Harris and Ogbonna (2003) for whom research on marketing organization is organized around three streams: "*the structural location of the marketing function, the influence of marketing and activity-based research into marketing organization*" (p. 484).

We could add also add another stream gathering all the work focussing on the aspect of contingency factors. This stream of research investigates how organizational dimensions will vary across a set of conditions (Ruekert and Walker, 1987; Piercy, 1986).

To summarize what kind of works the "marketing organization issue" encompasses we can refer to:

- Works dedicated to the nature of marketing *activities* undertaken within firms. The work from Workman, Homburg and Gruner (1998) illustrates this trend as does the work by Webster (1997). The emerging works on marketing processes can also be linked to this stream (see Diller and Ivens, 2005).
- "*Structural*" works can be illustrated by the works from Ruekert et al. (1985), Achrol (1991, 1997), Achrol and Kotler (1999). These works are based on a description of marketing organization according to the traditional Weberian bureaucratic dimensions: centralization, formalization and specialization (Weber, 1947) or in a more developed way: specialization, standardization, formalization, centralization, configuration (e.g. Hakasson and Ostberg, 1975).
- Other works are centred on the *power* of the marketing department. Numerous authors have been interested in this topic (Anderson, 1982; Day, 1997; Piercy, 1986, 1989) and Piercy and Morgan (1989), Workman et al. (1998).

- Several works (and among them very recent ones) focus on the *interface* of marketing and other functions in the company, whether these other functions are sales (Homburg, Jensen and Krohmer, 2008; Kotler, Rackam & Krishnaswamy, 2006; Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy, 2007; Massey and Dawes, 2006; Rouziès et al. 2005); R&D (Leenders and Wierenga, 2008 & 2002); Manufacturing (Prabhaker, 2001); finance (de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000).
- Several works are dedicated to exploring and explaining the links between marketing organization and strategy and/or performance (Olson, Slater and Hult, 2005; Slater and Olson 2002; Vorhies and Morgan 2003, Weinzimmer et al. 2003)
- Finally, another stream gather all the work focusing on the aspect of contingency factors. This stream of research investigates how organizational dimensions will vary across a set of conditions (Ruekert and Walker, 1987; Piercy, 1986).

Of course none of these perspectives within whom the marketing organization issue is raised is exclusive one from another. Most of the work cited above are mixing several of these perspectives.

### **3. Why is marketing organization an important issue for the business to business field?**

In several of our previous communications on the topic of marketing organization (Pardo and Ivens, 2006; Ivens, Pardo and Tunisini, 2007) we underlined what appears to be a real paradox.

First we put into evidence that the importance of marketing organization has been (and is still) displayed by numerous authors giving it the status of a *condition* of firm performance.

For some authors, marketing organization is an indirect determinant of firm performance: it is then considered as a mean for strategy implementation (Slater and Olson, 2000; Vorhies and Morgan, 2003; Walker and Ruekert, 1987). As Vorhies and Morgan (2003) recently recalled "*theory posits that organizing marketing activities in ways that fit the implementation requirements of a business's strategy enhances performance*".

For Hakansson and Ostberg (1975) marketing organization must even be treated as a *full* dimension of the marketing strategy (along with more traditional dimensions such as product, distribution, promotion, etc): "*The organization of the marketing function must be another important aspect of the marketing strategy*" (Hakansson and Ostberg, 1975, p. 118). As a matter of fact, it is organization that offers possibilities for the social exchanges needed in the interaction process (Hakansson and Ostberg 1975, p. 121).

But, at the same time equally numerous scholars argue that the marketing organization topic is *understudied* in the literature (Harris and Ogbonna, 2003; Moller and Rajala, 1999).

Then, if marketing organization plays such an important role, why are its characteristics so understudied ?

If we except the works from Weitz and Anderson, (1981), Piercy (1986), and more recently those from Workman et al. (1998), attention to organizational aspects of marketing has been very limited. Everything goes just as if "*issues of organizational structure and behaviors [were remaining] a tangential concern for marketing enquiry*" (Murray, O'Driscoll and Torres 2002, p.2).

Most recent works display a trend toward very *specific* aspects of marketing organization (and not marketing organization as a whole). For instance, numerous proposals have been made those last five years on research dedicated to the observation of the marketing-sales interface (Homburg, Jensen and Krohmer, 2008; Kotler, Rackam and Krishnaswamy, 2006; Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy, 2007; Massey and Dawes, 2006; Rouziès et al., 2005). Works on key account management also raises the problem of marketing organization but from a very narrow point of view (Pardo, Salle and Spencer,

1995; Wengler, Ehrhet and Saab, 2006; Homburg, Workman and Jensen, 2002; Workman, Homburg and Jensen, 2003). The same can be said with works "hyper focusing" on processual aspects of the marketing organization (Diller and Ivens 2006).

This trend toward a specialization (not to say "hyper-specialization") of works related to marketing organization does not allow any integrated view of the issue. More problematic also is the fact that consensus is far from being the rule on the above described topics. And, as Harris and Ogbonna (2003) put it "*practitioners appear bombarded with conflicting and contradictory prescriptions for the organization of marketing*" (p. 483). According to these authors the reason for such diversity of opinions is to be found in the "*limited explicit academic attention to the organization of marketing activities within the firm*" (Harris and Ogbonna, 2003, p. 484).

#### **4. Some common hypotheses in marketing organization**

The previous paragraphs have put into evidence that literature on marketing organization has investigated a broad number of different issues, sometimes leading to conflicting outcomes. In this paper we focus upon a set of five topics we will study empirically.

##### *1) Is marketing still done in "marketing departments"?*

Numerous authors (Achrol and Kotler, 1999; Webster, Malter and Ganesan, 2005) underline a "dispersion" or disintegration of the marketing function. The increasing market orientation of many businesses and the increasing awareness of all functional areas inside a company of the necessity to take customer needs and competitor strategies into account have been put forward as explanatory factors.

Cross-functional dispersion of marketing activities increases the need for the establishment of integrating mechanisms which ensure that the different actors inside a firm (and in a larger view inside a value-chain or network of firms marketing their offerings together) work in a coordinated manner.

In this study we aim at identifying to what degree marketing is really cross-functional in industrial firms.

##### *2) What are the core marketing activities?*

The debate about the precise domain of marketing is as old as the discipline itself. Different authors see different functions as being part of marketing: "*As to precisely what these functions are, or should be, there is some room for debate*" (Piercy, 1986).

Indeed a precise list of what can be considered as a marketing activity has never been provided (Webster, 1997).

In practice, companies design their marketing departments (if such departments exist) in heterogeneous ways. This makes it difficult to establish a final list of those activities which are by definition part of marketing. In industrial marketing, there is a striking difference between what textbooks define as the field of marketing and the domain that firms label with the same term.

In this study we try to identify which activities companies subsume under the roof of marketing.

##### *3) What is the power of marketing?*

Another hypotheses often advanced is that the marketing department is losing power as compared to other departments. Power of marketing refers to "*exercised power of the marketing subunit within a business unit, relative to other subunits, over activities important to the success of the business unit*" (Homburg, Workman and Krohmer, 1999, p. 2). These authors hypothesize a decrease of the

marketing managers' power. One explanation given for the decreasing influence of marketing inside firms is the lack of transparency about the effectiveness with which companies use their marketing resources.

In this study we analyze what the relative power of firms' marketing department is in comparison with such other functions as finance, sales, human resources or production.

#### *4) What about the degree of centralization, standardization, formalization and specialization of marketing ?*

The literature has never provided an integrative picture of the marketing organization around the four main "bureaucratic" dimensions: centralization, standardization, formalization and specialization of marketing. But on several of these four dimensions numerous authors have provided their conceptual or empirical views (Webster et al., 2005, Workman, Homburg and Gruner, 1998; Rico, 1994 & 1995). It could be expected that many factors (such as industry type, firm size, national or corporate culture) have an influence on the degree of centralization, standardization, formalization and specialization of marketing.

In this study we are interested in dressing a state-of-the-art for one country market (i.e. France).

#### *5) What are the trends in the evolution of the marketing organization.*

Several author (Wesbter, Malter and Ganesan, 2005; Workman, Homburg and Gruner, 1998) identified several trends that seems interesting to be empirically investigated. The shift of marketing to strategic business units; the rise of key account management, etc. are examples of such trends.

In our empirical study we attempt to obtain empirical support for the evolution of certain of these trends.

## **5. Methodology**

A written survey was conducted among French industrial companies operating on an international or global level. These companies belong to different activity sectors, they have different size, and interviewees belong to different marketing or sales functions. The questionnaire included scales to measure various aspects of marketing organization such as centralization, standardization etc. Out of 1850 questionnaires mailed to companies, 203 were returned (return rate of 13,5%). Respondents were mainly "marketers" (57%) (product managers, brand managers, marketing directors, etc) "salespeople" (10,5%), "sales and marketing managers" (9,5%) "general managers" (8%), other respondent occupy other various functions (project managers, consultants,...). The distribution of respondent companies across firm size categories was fairly broad. Hence, we are confident that the sample provides a relatively good mirror image of the French industrial sector.

## **6. Main descriptive results**

### **6.1 Is marketing still done in "marketing departments"?**

In a large majority of the companies interviewed an "organizational entity" in charge of marketing exist. In half of the cases this department counts less than 10 persons. In 37% of the cases this department counts more than 20 persons.

The names given to such a entity in charge of marketing ranges from : marketing department, Marketing Direction, Marketing Service to sales and Marketing department or even Business

Development or Business operations, and so on! Moreover, in nearly 70% of the cases, outside of this department other people are carrying out marketing tasks.

The "non disappearance" of the marketing department is consistent with the position of Workman et al. (1998). In their field observations they did not find "*evidence that firms are eliminating marketing departments or abandoning functional organizational forms*" (p. 35). The result is all the more important that, as Homburg et al. (2008) recall, several conceptual works on the 90' were focusing on the issue of whether market-oriented firms even should have marketing departments (Day, 1997; Doyle, 1995; Greyser, 1997). "*The fact that marketing will and should continue to exist as a functional group, is consistent with the positions of Webster (1997), Varadarajan (1992), Greyser (1997), and others*". (Workman, Homburg and Gruner, 1998, p. 35).

## 6.2 What are the core marketing activities?

We studied which out of 22 activities are seen as core marketing activities in French industrial firms.

The results show that there is a set of three activities which receive the highest level of agreement, i.e. *market segmentation, market research, and identifying customer needs*. A series of eight more activities (such as targeting, positioning or customer satisfaction surveys) is equally seen as typical marketing activities, but with a significantly lower level of agreement. Finally, several other activities (such as supply chain management or relationship management) are perceived to be much less related to marketing's core activities.

In 1986, Piercy in a work on marketing in the British industry found wide variations across the firms about what marketing responsibilities were, with marketing having the greatest responsibility for marketing research and advertising and the least responsibility for warehousing and transport.

These results also raise the issue of the "uncertain definition" of marketing. For Webster et al. (2005) such an uncertain definition can be considered as a real weakness of marketing. Their point is "*It is hard to win budgetary support for marketing if it remains an ambiguous concept with unclear responsibilities and makes an uncertain contribution to the company's financial performance*" (p. 37).

## 6.3 What is the power of marketing?

Out of eight functions, our respondents clearly identify the finance and the sales function inside their companies as the most influential entities.

Marketing occupies the third place followed by operations, R&D, logistics, purchasing and HR. It is most influential in decision concerning communication, new product development and pricing of new products.

This result does not support a significant loss of power for marketing as it was predicted by several authors. As Harris and Ogbonna (2003) recalls "*by the late 1990s commentators were questioning whether the marketing function was currently losing power (e.g. Piercy, 1998)*" (Harris and Ogbonna, 2003, p. 487). This result is much more consistent with Homburg et al. (1999). They put into evidence that the marketing function still has significant influence and as Harris and Ogbonna underline "*that such influence is functional and thus not necessarily dependent on the character and personality of individuals*" (Harris and Ogbonna, 2003, p. 489).

#### 6.4 What about the degree of centralization, standardization, formalization and specialization of marketing ?

Our results show that marketing is perceived, by our respondents, as being complex and centralized. On the other hand, standardization is relatively low.

Ruekert et al. (1985) are among the few authors who propose analyses based on structural aspects of marketing. They argue that the centralization, formalization and specialization of marketing activities depends on environmental conditions and task characteristics. They also propose four archetypal forms of marketing organization (bureaucratic, transactional, organic and relational) which vary in the structural location, centralization, formalization and specialization of activities. They hypothesize a link between a high level of formalization and centralization, together with a low level of specialization and performance.

#### 5.5 What are the trends in the evolution of the marketing organization.

A major result described by respondents working is the establishment of a global-local balance whereas there is little evidence for truly globalized marketing in companies or absolutely "local marketing" companies. In the same vein, marketing units are present at the international as well as at the local level in international companies.

Team work in marketing and the growing importance of key account management are mentioned as the most important developments currently. Those results are consistent with numerous works. Homburg et al. (2000) for instance clearly indicated that "*One of the more significant organizational changes identified in our field research is an increasing emphasis on key account management*". (p. 469). About team selling Weitz and Bradford (1999) for instance have regularly put into evidence that a growing number of companies were adopting a team approach. These teams are composed of people "*from different functional areas in the firm possessing diverse knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). This diversity [...] increases the probability of developing creative, win-win solutions and realizing the support from different functional areas for implementing the solutions*" (Weitz and Bradford, 1999, p. 248).

### 6. A contingency view

Finally, we also included several contingency factors in our study in order to obtain results related to the fourth stream of research identified above. Here, our findings are based upon regression analyses in which we analyze the explanatory power of contingency variables for the extent of centralization, standardization etc. Our findings are summarized in table 1.

From the results it emerges that complexity and centralization cannot be explained by the contingency variables included in this analysis whereas standardization, formalization and specialization have a causal link with the antecedent variables.

	Complexity	Centralisation	Standardisation	Formalization	Specialisation
adj. R2	0.006	0.014	0.095	0.144	0.101
F-Value	1.178 n.s.	1.379 n.s.	3.951 **	5.643 ***	4.129 ***
Turbulence	0.128 n.s.	-0.111 n.s.	-0.033 n.s.	-0.033 n.s.	-0.094 n.s.

Demand	-0.004	n.s.	-0.018	n.s.	0.167	**	-0.007	n.s.	0.122	**
Uncertainty	0.072	n.s.	0.026	n.s.	-0.026	n.s.	-0.077	n.s.	0.030	n.s.
Dynamism	0.132	n.s.	0.181	**	-0.032	n.s.	0.060	n.s.	0.123	n.s.
Customer orientation	0.048	n.s.	-0.024	n.s.	0.274	**	0.246	***	0.086	**
Innovation orientation	-0.025	n.s.	0.029	n.s.	0.010	n.s.	0.212	**	0.137	n.s.

Table 1: Regression analysis of antecedents to five organizational dimensions

## 7. Discussion of the results and directions for future research

Our study provides a descriptive view of the structural organization in French industrial companies and allows some insights into what precisely marketing's job is in industrial companies: practitioners see the core of business to business marketing in a limited number of activities and related topics. We summarize our main findings along the following ideas:

- There is a real "porosity" between marketing and sales from a functional point of view. Or in other words: people with no marketing titles do marketing and people with no "sales" titles do have sales activities;
- We do not support the idea that marketing has been pushed down in the organization and out into the strategic business units. All goes like there is still room (and a need for?) a strategic *and* operational marketing;
- We do not support a total marginalization of marketing: we observed that marketers see their department among the more influential departments in their companies.
- We do support the idea of the growing role of KAM and team work.
- We describe a marketing that has still a traditional "content" (marketing is market survey and the top of the STP marketing strategic sequence);
- The marketing we observe is rather influencing traditional marketing decision (Communication decisions; Measuring customer satisfaction; Improving customer satisfaction)
- We still have a transactional view of marketing (relationship management is not marketing. Relationship management is personal selling?)
- We still have a rather a non-processual view (supply chain is not marketing) of marketing.

Based on this results it seems to us that a managerial concern about marketing organization is still totally relevant in companies. We can imagine it structured around three main issues:

- What does marketing mean for my company?
- Do I use marketing as a means to implement relational exchanges?
- Am I aware of different organizational alternatives for marketing?

We also think that these first results must be considered as an incentive to further research on the marketing organization topic. There is a lot to be observed, analyzed and explained.

Scholars and practitioners have been living for more than twenty years now in an era encouraging a shift toward more relational exchanges between firms.

Recent years have tempered this "dominant logic" favoring more the idea of a "portfolio of exchanges" to be managed by a company, with exchanges being more transactional and other more relational or sometimes exchanges being both.

An other important idea has emerged, depicting marketing as an actor of value creation through its ability to combine value-chains from different actors (suppliers, customers, competitors, partners), and as such acting as a "resources combinatory". We are now deeply convinced that this renewed vision of marketing is from now on meaningful for scholars and marketers time has now come to think about the means to implement those changes and part of this means rely on marketing organizational issues.

A logical next step in empirical research would be to compare the results obtained here for France with data gathered in other European countries in order to identify national specificities in industrial marketing organization. Comparative case studies as well as additional large scale surveys would be appropriate means for this purpose.

Furthermore, research comparing the view marketers have on their function (i.e. the view we have been able to obtain through our empirical data) with the point of view other functions (such as finance, research & development or logistics) have would be of interest in order to identify potential perceptual gaps.

Finally, studying the limit between a firm's organizational structure and its exchange partners' organizational structures and analyzing the frictions taking place from an organizational point of view would be another interesting avenue for future research.

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