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"Handling Plurality of Relationship Forms in Networks: from Clans to Clubs, from Cliques to Communities. Theoretical and Managerial Perspectives"

Artefacts of Corporate Identity and Business Relationships

by

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Artefacts of Corporate Identity and Business Relationships

ABSTRACT

Relationship marketing is a concept that encompasses a wide range and forms of continuous exchanges between market players. The continuity of exchanges stresses the need for additional underlying postures and behavioural consistency, leading to the call for strong corporate identities as a means to maintain and develop such relationships. This study focuses on the manifestations of identity at the value chain – channel members – level. It constitutes an exploratory study into the association between market relationship dynamics and Corporate Identity (CI). In order to explore the multiple perspectives of CI within a supply network an exploratory-descriptive research design was adopted and twenty-eight interviews were the primary form of data collection within a single supply network from the engineering industry. Our findings suggest that CI embedded in artefacts helps buyers and suppliers define and shape both the terms of the agreement and the emergent inter-firm practices that would make the agreement work. Further, that CI embedded in artefacts helps to create common ground and shared cognitive maps of how relationships might work and how unanticipated problems might be handled. In this way artefacts became important boundary spanning objects.

KEYWORDS: Corporate Identity, Supply Networks, Business Relationships, Relationship Marketing.

Working Paper

INTRODUCTION

Companies are not isolated. They are part of networks of suppliers, customers and other audiences with whom relationships are established (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). Relationship marketing is a concept that encompasses relational contracting (MacNeil 1980), working partnerships (Anderson and Narus 1990), symbiotic marketing (Varadarajan and Rajaratnam 1986) and internal marketing (Berry et al. 1991). This wide range of continuous exchange practices between market actors suggests that companies seek new ways to start, strengthen and cultivate relationships. The continuity of exchanges stresses the need for additional underlying postures and behavioural consistency, leading to the call for strong corporate identities as a means to maintain and develop such relationships.

Market relationship dynamics have been associated with marketing developed at the corporate level. It seems likely therefore, that corporate identity acts as a facilitator for the establishment and development of inter-firm relationships. When considering business relationships within supply networks, how suppliers and buyers perceive and interpret their trading partners' corporate identity, affects the business agreement and, ultimately, business performance (see for example, Robson et al. 2002). In order to communicate their corporate identities companies use instruments or artefacts to convey a desired image. Examples of corporate identity artefacts are particularly abundant in the visual identity/design literature incorporating aspects such as organisational nomenclature, logos, company house styles and visual identity systems (Carter 1982; Olins 1991) (Pilditch, 1970; Henrion and Parkin, 1967). Attention centres on the management of corporate symbols that transmit the strategic, visual dimensions of corporate identity to various audiences (Balmer and Soenen 1997). Parallel references to the management of identity symbols may be found in other streams of literature such as organisational studies (Si, 2004; Hatch and Schultz 1997; Richard and Cornelia 1997).

When particularly addressing the identity instruments, literature focuses essentially on the need for consistency among communication instruments in conveying the company's being (Berthon et al. 2009). The investigation of the company's handling of corporate symbols and artefacts centres on approaching stakeholders such as employees and consumers. While useful insights have been generated from previous research, no study seems to have explicitly focused on specific identity artefacts present in the development of business relationships. It seems, however, that presenting evidence of corporate identity through artefacts may facilitate business to business relationship. Embodying identity in those artefacts assists with setting the course of action for the relationship. Our study sets out to explore the way artefacts of Corporate Identity (CI) are present in relationships between companies and their supply network members. To the endeavour we conducted a study of the development of a new supplier network by following the creation and use of three key artefacts; invitation to tender, tender and a workflow documents. The development of the supply network (and specifically the emergence of the relationship between the core buyer and supplier in the network) was observed over a twelve month period. The three artefacts were tracked and respondents interviewed to explore how these artefacts shaped perceptions of CI and the supply network.

The remainder of this paper is organised to first review the supplier network and corporate identity literature. Second, a brief description of the methods used during this study is then elucidated. Finally the supply network case is presented and the interpretation of finding discussed. The paper concludes with by outlining the value of embedding corporate identity in key artefacts when developing business networks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

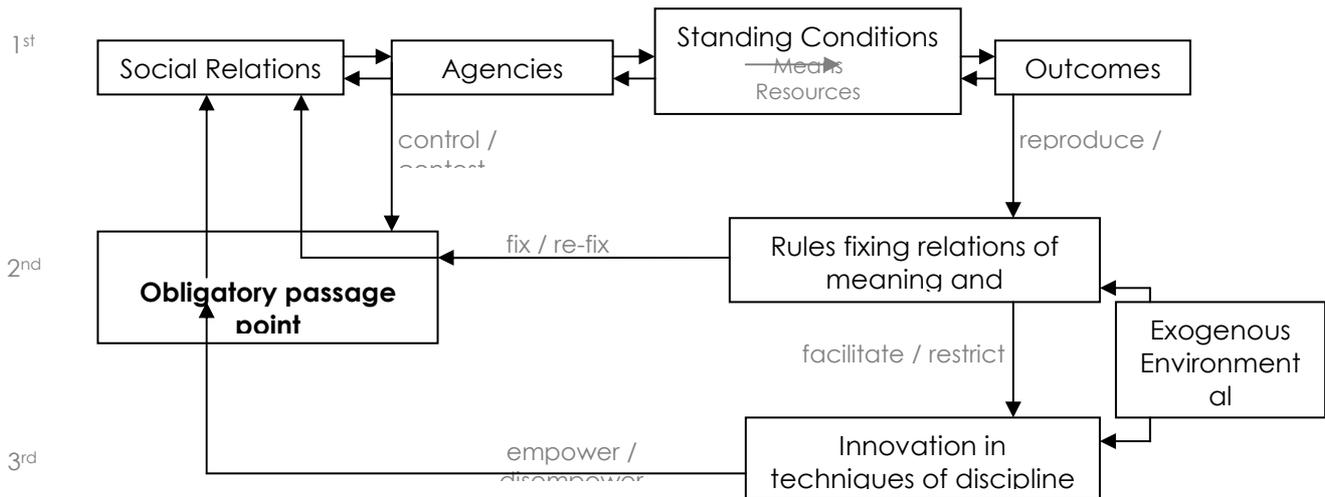
Market Relationships and Supply Networks

Marketing paradigms emphasise the construction of relationships between audiences and the company. Relationship marketing theory suggests that businesses are interested in encouraging and building long-term relationships by initiating, developing and maintaining customer (and supplier) relationships. Morgan and Hunt (1994) consider commitment and trust to be central to inter-firm relationships. There is evidence to suggest that trust and commitment are important components of successful inter-firm relationships (c.f. Anderson and Weitz 1992; Siguaw et al. 1998; Urban et al. 2000) and as such should be considered as dimensions of an inter-firm relationship management. A further dimension is channel leadership (El-Ansary and Robineaux 1974; Little 1970), in particular leadership style. Leadership style focuses on the actual leader behaviour, what the leader does and how it is done (Katz and Kahn 1953; Stogdill and Coons 1957). The final proposed determinant of inter-firm relationship typology is channel power. Power is conventionally defined in the behavioural science literature as the ability to evoke a change in another's behaviour (c.f. Cartwright, 1965; Emerson, 1962; Munson et al., 1999). Gaski and Nevin (1983) highlight the difference between channel power and channel leadership, commenting: "[n]ote, especially that power is defined as an ability, a potential, rather than actual alteration of behaviour." (Gaski and Nevin 1985). However, recent research into business networks has explored the dynamic nature of business relationships (Mishra and Seshadri 2000). Indeed, Clegg (1989) recognises the dynamic nature of power in organisations. Clegg suggests that social relations, artefacts and institutional systems and mechanisms (or rules) interact to allow power (and we suggest leadership, commitment, co-operation and trust) to shift over time.

While Clegg's three circuits of power (Figure 1.) are derived from an intra-firm perspective, commonalities between Clegg's findings and observations made in the network literature can be found. For example, Clegg's first circuit recognises that episodes of interactions between individuals and artefacts within an organisation can cause shifts in power between agents/actors and individuals. Similarly, in the network literature (Håkansson and Snehota 1995) refers to the episodic nature of inter-firm relationships within business networks. Clegg's second circuit draws on institutional theory to suggest that rules of practice are developed and made explicit to the actors in ways that facilitate (or restrict) social integration between individual actors or groups of actors. Again, in the network literature Araujo (2007) discusses the institution nature of the rules of engagement in inter-firm relationship development. An important issue raised by Clegg when discussing the second circuit of power is the use of 'obligatory passage points'. The network literature is full of observations of such passage points in describing the commencement and development inter-firm relationship, exposing the challenges of, for example, developing contracts (Seshadri and Mishra 2004). In this way, when firms set out to develop inter-firm relationships it seems likely that the rules they co-develop or impose on the relationship, together with the artefacts they develop and use to capture and convey these rules are likely to influence the way the relationship develops and succeeds (Sluss and Ashforth 2008).

Finally, Clegg's third circuit of power looks at how actors influence each other through domination/leadership and systems integrations. The network literature recognises the role of systems integration through the exposure of inter-firm routines and dynamic capabilities that spread beyond the boundaries of the firm and into the wider network (Mason and Leek 2008). In this way, markets can be understood as dynamic networks whereby the actions and intentions of actors within the network affect the development of business relationships (McLoughlin and Horan 2002). Developing an understanding of how firms capture and represent desired behaviours in artefacts that represent a translated, arbitrated view of a relationship, is likely to generate insights into the how firms can cultivate successful business-to-business relationships and networks (c.f. Star and Griesemer 1989). Corporate identity is often embedded in such documentation in the forms of logos and house styles, (Carter, 1982; Olins, 1991) and therefore may act as a facilitator when establishing business-to-business relationships.

Figure 1. Circuits of Power



Source: Clegg (1989:214)

Artefacts and Instruments in Corporate Identity

It is clear that companies are keen to encourage positive attitudes towards their offers and themselves. In this context, the literature refers to the notion of corporate identity. *Identity* “comprises the ways that a company aims to identify itself or position its product” (Kotler 1997). Corporate Identity “...is what helps an organization, or part of it, feel that it truly exists and that it is a coherent and unique being, with a history and a place of its own, different from others” (Kapeferer 1996). The underlying idea in this concept is that each organization has its own individuality and uniqueness.

Although the domain of corporate identity is not consensual, there is an underlying idea about the multidimensionality of the CI construct and the exertion of management control over some of the CI features. Various corporate identity mixes may be found in the literature. For example, Corporate identity is established to comprise symbols (visual identity and design aspects such as corporate name and house style), communication (all forms of internal and external corporate communications), and behaviour (how the corporation behaves involving aspects of corporate climate) (van-Riel 1995; van-Riel and Balmer 1997) or is formed by reference to soul (e.g., values, culture), voice (e.g., communication) and mind (e.g., vision and philosophy) (Balmer and Soenen 1997). Existing studies directly or indirectly approaching the management of CI take account of specific aspects. Kennedy (1977) conducted empirical research into the importance of personnel in image formation. Melewar and Saunders (2000; 1999) brought corporate systems to the fore as an essential element of a business projected image in a global context showing the relevance of standardising visual identity systems for multinationals as a vehicle for projecting the company identity. Simões *et al.* (2005) specified dimensions of CI that ought to be managed internally, in particular, at the business unit level. As they explain, the management of corporate identity embraces “(1) the endorsement of consistent behaviour through the diffusion of a company’s mission, values, and goals; (2) the expression and pursuit of brand and image consistency in the organization’s symbols and forms of communication; and (3) the implementation, support, and maintenance of visual systems” (p. 153).

In sum, corporate identity entails a unique posture that a corporation conveys about itself, embracing and communicating its values, purpose and behaviours. Frequently, employees (actors) personify identity for external audiences. The articulation of behaviours and artefacts/instruments should be interactive and consistent in all its forms (internal and external) in order to transmit the desired

identity. In particular regarding the artefacts of identity, managers have an interest in managing or manipulating symbols (e.g., rituals, physical settings) to convey an organisation's identity. Ashforth and Mael (1989) comment that,

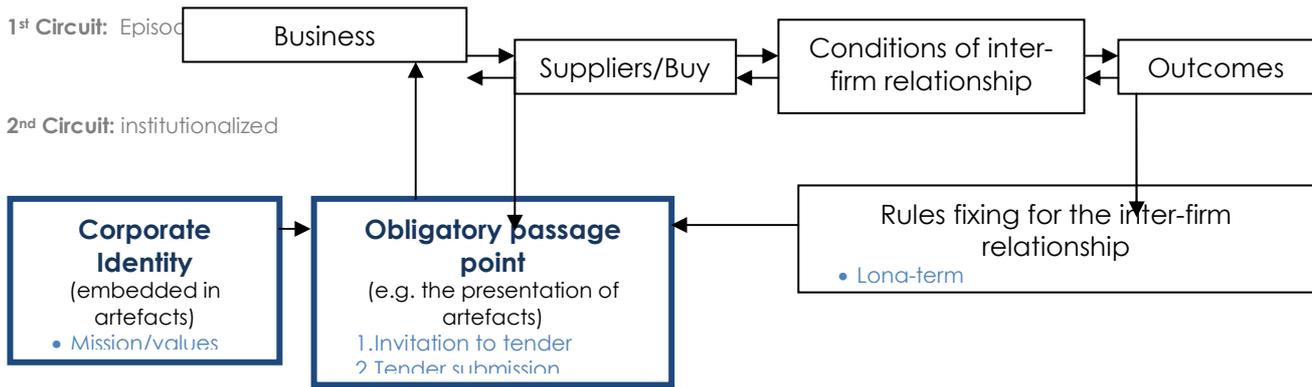
“it is tacitly understood by managers that a positive and distinctive organisational identity attracts the recognition, support, and loyalty of not only organisational members but other key constituents (e.g., stakeholders, customers, job seekers), and it is this search for a distinctive identity that induces organisations to focus so intensely on advertising, names and logos, jargon, leaders and mascots, and so forth.”(p.28)

Symbolic and visual dimensions of identity are addressed in the graphic design/visual identity school promoting consistency across all possible forms of a company's physical identification in order to develop a strong corporate image. In this way, visual identity can be understood as the 'face' of the company (Topalian, 1984). Therefore, all parts of a corporation that may be seen or heard are of relevance. There are numerous examples of corporate identity becoming visually embedded in artefacts; advertisements, uniforms, letterheads, business cards, buildings, signage, and logos (Carter 1982; Margulies, 1977; Olins, 1991; Pilditch, 1970). Indeed much has been written about how Corporate identity symbolism should be communicated to employees so that symbols are understood (Olins 1991) and translated to the contexts of individuals working in different departments within an organisations. We argue that there are additional artefacts and instruments of CI that have not been traditionally considered in the literature. It is our view that there are documents portraying an identity content that are used in the development of business-to-business relationships. For example, when a buyer wishes to identify and develop a long-term relationship with a potential supplier, the buyer must first communicate the intent to the potential supplier(s). This is usually done through an Invitation to Tender. Such documentation is now widely available on the internet and many organisations have standard protocols for prescribing how ITTs are presented and what is included (e.g., incorporate the company's logo, mission and values, etc.).

Artefacts of Corporate Identity and Circuits of Influence in Supply Networks

Extending Clegg's model of Circuits of Power (Figure 1.) to the context of inter-firm relationships and the wider business networks, suggests that organisations experience episodes of interactions that enable each actors to i) develop their perceptions of their own identity and their role in the relationship and ii) develop their perceptions of the other firm's corporate identity and the other firm's role in the relationship (and the wider business network) (Figure 2). These identities are captured and reflected on both sides of an inter-firm relationship, in artefacts that lay out the expected behaviours of the actors in the specific relationship through the development of tender documents and work flow documents for example. Artefacts such as the ITT can be seen to represent what Clegg refers to as an obligatory passage point through which a buyer must go at the early stages of a relationship. For the business network to develop, the supplier must then respond through the submission of a Tender document to the buyer; each document portraying its own corporate identity and reacting to the identity of the other. Thus, we suggest that artefacts such as ITTs and Tender documents use CI as an instrument to understand, reflect and share organisational intentions and actions. These artefacts also represent obligatory passage point through which the actors much pass during the development of the business network. The following presents a framework through which the relationship between corporate identity and business relationships might be explored further.

Figure 2. Artefacts of Corporate Identity and Circuits of Influence in Supply Networks



In order to explore the proposed framework further we followed the creation and circulation of three central artefacts in an emergent supply network. The following section describes the research design and methods used in the study.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The purpose of our research was to explore the influence of corporate identity on the development of business-to-business relationships. Using a single case-method (Flyvbjerg 2007; Halinen and Tornroos 2005), we conducted an exploratory study, designed to examine the artefacts that captured, represented and projected the identities of the firms as they developed a new business-to-business relationship (Eisenhardt 1989; Pettigrew 1990). The exploration of a business relationship is likely to generate in-depth insights into how firms develop perceptions of their own firm and other firms with whom they establish relationships. Further, the study should contribute to our understanding of how these perceptions of corporate identity are brought together and captured in artefacts that come to inform ‘the relationship’.

The study tracks artefacts from the moment the buyer sends out the ITT, through the tendering process, to a point shortly after contract award. Consequently, the three key artefacts that form the focus of the study are: 1) the ITT (prepared by the buyer and shared with the supplier), 2) the Tender document (prepared by the supplier and shared with the buyer) and, 3) the Work flow document (jointly prepared by buyer and supplier and shared with other suppliers being brought into the network).

Empirical data were collected over a twelve month period, from the buyer and the supplier. These companies were selected because of their endeavours to understand each other and develop an effective relationship. Firms and employees have been renamed to protect their identity. The collected data included the three artefacts identified above and personal, semi-structured interviews with those responsible for developing, presenting and interpreting these artefacts (Yin 1994). Key informants included interviewees from both the buyer and the supplier: the heads of each of the core functions and the line-managers involved in the relationship. A total of twenty-eight interviews were carried out (Table 1). An interview guide helped us explore inter-firm understanding and the perceptions each firm developed of the other, based on the events and objects that influenced them. Each artefact was scrutinised for evidence of different aspects of CI (Figure 3).

Table 1: Key Informants and Interviews

Company	Seniority of interviewees	Name	0-6 months	6-12 months
Buyer	Senior Buyer	Martin	3	3

	Director	Will	2	2
	Senior Manager	George	3	3
	Director	Geoff	2	2
Supplier	Director	Sam	2	2
	Senior Manager	Jack	2	2
Total no. of interviews				28

FINDINGS

This section of the paper explores the findings through the lens of the two circuits presented in Figure 2. The research begins with the buyer conducting a make/buy analysis of engineering services.

1st Circuit:

The first circuit begins in the top left hand corner of Figure 2 with the initiation of Business Relationships. Once the buyer had decided to buy in engineering services from an external supplier, the first job was to identify and approach potential suppliers. In this regard, interactions with potential suppliers represented episodes that helped the buyer understand what the market might offer. As soon as the buyer starts to interact with suppliers the actors (each buyer-supplier dyad) embark upon a Business Relationship (*c.f.* Ford 2003). For some of the suppliers in the network the relationship was short and stopped directly after the initial enquiry. For other suppliers this marked the beginning of a longer relationship. Martin (Senior Buyer) explained,

“We talked to them on the phone first. Of course we knew some of them [the suppliers] from other business we had done in different parts of the company. But others [suppliers], we just wanted to checkout,... [pause] even though we knew they were long shots. We didn’t pursue any of these [suppliers]. We didn’t contact them again.”

Each interaction between buyer and supplier is likely to influence how any specific dyadic business relationship develops. Through these interactions, the suppliers have influence on the buyer as the buyer tries to understand what the conditions of the relationship might be. During this stage of the relationship, the buyer was fairly limited with the amount of information they released to the potential suppliers. Martin (Senior Buyer), explains,

“we kept our cards close to our chest, because we really didn’t know what we wanted when we first started talking [to potential suppliers].... and a lot of what we’re doing now is finding out from the net, talking to anyone [in the buying firm] that has used/bought these sort of services in the past to get a sense of what’s on offer – what’s doable and what’s not.”

Despite these observations, it was clear that even at this stage, the buyer knew broadly, the type of business relationship they wanted to develop. Will, Director of Purchasing,

“We need to develop a partnership with a supplier that we can trust, that will be proactive and bring ideas to the table...”

Martin further illustrated this point,

“We need to be able to work WITH these people, because we haven’t done this before and neither have they. This is going to mean they really need to understand us, how we work, how we think...”

By focusing on the need for the firms to work closely together and for the supplier to understand and by implication, adopt, the buyer’s ‘ways of working’, the buyer is trying to identify and share with potential suppliers their thoughts on the likely conditions of the inter-firm relationship. How long the agreement might last, on what basis work would be allocated, what is the likely rate of growth of the business and so on. Similarly, such interactions are important to the suppliers. And in this sense the conditions of the inter-

firm relationship need to be jointly understood and accepted by both supplier and buyer before the relationship can develop. The Outcome therefore (Figure 2.), is first, that the buyer now has a rudimentary understanding of the services that might be bought and the way the relationship might work in order to ensure the successful delivery of the services. Second, that the buyer decides to take the next step in developing relationships with six suppliers (and that each supplier also signals an interest in a continuation of the relationship).

The first circuit then is about interaction episodes that allow the actors to understand the means and resources that will become available to them if a business network is developed. As can be seen Will's comment above shows how the aim, mission, values of the suppliers need to be understood by the buyer, as well as the capabilities and the products/service offering. Further, the information about the different dimensions of CI is actively being sought by the buyer about the suppliers, all-be-it in a verbal and informal way.

Next the buyer attempts to develop a set of Rules for the inter-firm relationship (Figure 2) and so enters to the second circuit.

2nd Circuit:

The second circuit, emerges when the Rules of the inter-firm relationship (Figure 2.) are developed. At this point, the buyer has learnt sufficient about the state of the services supply market and the nature of what they are trying to do to be able to fix some rules. The buyer focuses on two key rules; that the relationship is long-term (initially the buyer's think three years) and that the supplier has to have a problem solving approach, working with the buyer to overcome unforeseen problems that arise. Will and Martin again,

"We know this is complex procurement – that just means we haven't done it before and so we need to think carefully about exactly what we do, and what they do [the supplier], and how we do that."(Martin)

"We need to consider both the long and short term objectives in doing this, and that has implications for the supply agreement we develop as well as the way we manage it and develop it."(Will)

The rules are fixed internally by the buying team and the engineers within the buyer firm. Before these can be shared with the suppliers, rules must be captured and presented as 'Rules'. The mechanism for doing this is laid down by the buyer's organisation which provides detailed guidelines for preparing an issuing an Invitation to Tender (ITT). The ITT therefore, represents an 'Obligatory passage point' (Figure 2.) through which the buyer must pass in order to further develop a business relationship with any given supplier. The buyer's internal procedures demand that an ITT is prepared in a house style that captures and communicates the 'rules' of the proposed relationship. The actors recognise that at this stage of the business relationship the rules are open to negotiation and improvement. The ITT takes the form of an artefact that represents what the buyer is as an organisation, its aim, values and intentions, as well as what it is hoping to achieve from the relationship. Martin (with the ITT in front of him),

"and you can see, the usual layout... it's quite basic at this stage. But it's clear, and essentially, you get what we are trying to do here; shared learning, innovative process solutions... trust."

In this sense, the ITT is capturing and presenting the CI of the buyer to the supplier. Thus, we argue that the visual system, brand consistency and values are fundamental aspects of CI that feed into the Obligatory passage point that drive the business relationship.

Figure 3. An Example of an ITT from the British National Space Centre

The screenshot shows the BNSC website with a search bar at the top right. The main navigation menu includes Home, About BNSC, Discovering Space, Our Planet, Missions, Learning Zone, Industry, Publications, and News and Events. The left sidebar lists News and Events, with sub-links for News, Events, Press Notices, Speeches, Space Image links, and Press Office contacts. The main content area features a breadcrumb trail: Home > News and Events > News. The headline reads: "Invitation to tender for study on improving access to International Charter on Space and Major Disasters". The text below states: "The British National Space Centre has issued an invitation to tender for a study to examine worldwide access to the International Charter on Space and Major Disasters. The objective of the study is to identify where and why access is limited, and provide recommendations on how to make improvements. The Charter aims to make satellite Earth observation data freely available to governments, or agencies, responding to major natural disasters. Through BNSC and DMC International Imaging Ltd, the UK currently leads the Charter. This study, which is expected to be carried out in early 2008, will be a key activity of the UK leadership. Closing date for the invitation to tender is 12 noon (GMT) Tuesday 15 January 2008. For more information and tender documentation contact: Dr Michael Rose, Earth Observation Programme Manager, michael.rose@bnsq.gov.uk".

Source: <http://www.bnsq.gov.uk/7180.aspx> - accessed 27/03/09

To protect the identity of the buyer, the buyer's ITT is not presented here. Instead an example of a typical ITT is pictured. Figure 3. presents an ITT issued by the British National Space Centre in December 2007. The displayed ITT incorporates the organisation logo as part of its branding "BNSC"; outlining the organisation's mission, "to make satellite Earth observation data freely available to governments, or agencies, responding to major natural disaster"; and the intent of the business relationship "[to commission research] to identify where and why access is limited, and provide recommendations on how to make improvements".

Return to the 1st Circuit:

The ITT is sent to potential suppliers and influences the emergent business relationships between. Sam (Director, Supplier) observed,

"By the time we saw the ITT we knew we were in with a chance. We could see from that [the ITT] that the conversations we'd been having with them [the buyer] over the past few months had had some impact – you could just see it; the wording, the language...."

Sam explained that the ITT together with informal communications with the buyer led them to believe that they should make a serious bid for the business. Like other suppliers, Sam spoke of spending significant time within his organisations, checking their 'translation' of the ITT document, making sure that they understood what the buyer was asking for. Sam and his team then spent considerable time talking to the buyer to check their interpretation of the ITT.

"We needed to be sure we understood what they [the buyer] wanted. Not just the services they wanted to buy, though that was complicated enough. But the way we were going to work together." (Sam, Director, Supplier)

In response to the ITT, suppliers checked their perceptions of the buyer (and other suppliers) to work out what the buyer wants, and what other suppliers might offer. Similarly, the period immediately after receiving the ITT was a time of reflection for Sam's firm.

"We [senior colleagues within Sam's firm] talked a lot about what we could and indeed, what we should do and how it fitted in the larger scheme of things." (Sam)

In this way, suppliers were found to be reflecting upon (and drawing from) their own corporate identities to work out what the service offering might be.

Using the lens of the first circuit the data did not show any significant changes in Conditions of the inter-firm relationship, but rather a circuit of interactive episodes that sought clarification of what the Conditions

were. The Outcome was that six suppliers wanted to develop the relationship further and thus enter the second circuit of influence for the second time.

Return to the 2nd Circuit:

Sam was concerned to show the buyer that his firm and the buyer had shared values. Sam explained, *“We knew we needed to communicate this [shared values] in our response to the ITT”*.

The required response to the ITT was for each supplier to submit a Tender document for consideration by the buyer. The Tender would be the document on which the buyer would base the decision to award the contract and represents the second ‘Obligatory passage point’ in the case (Figure 2’). Sam again,

“We decided to bring in some communication specialists. A PR [public relations] firm we’d used before... They looked at the ITT and they looked at our material, they talked to us and then they were like a mirror. They [the PR firm] used their [the buyer’s] words to head up sections; ‘the service’, ‘the relationship’, ‘problem solving’, ‘shared learning’,... it was amazing. They seemed to get the essence of our company and [the buyer’s firm] in the layout of the document. It looked amazing.”

The supplier seemed very aware of the role of visual systems and their use in conveying what were perceived as shared values (c.f. Melewar and Saunders, 1998). The inference was that aspects of the supplier’s corporate identity that echoed or mirrored those of the buyer would positively influence the development of the inter-firm relationship. It should be pointed out here that the supplier’s claim of wishing to align the identities and specifically the values of the buyer’s organisation with the supplier’s, did not appear to be superficial. The data suggest that this was of genuine concern to the actors and related to ‘choosing the right business partner’.

By submitting the Tender, the first circuit of influence is re-entered. The supplier is now influencing the buyer’s horizons and preferences by presenting an artefact that represents the potential development of the long-term relationship that has been discussed. The buyer has six Tenders. Martin (Senior Buyer) explained how the Tender documents compared.

“In the end, there was only really one firm that got it, that understood what we were looking for. It stood out a mile in the Tender.”

Sam’s firm were successful in their Tender. The contract was signed and the next stage of inter-firm relationship brought the two circuits of influence to operate in tandem.

1st and 2nd Circuits in Tandem:

To implement the supply agreement a work flow document in produced. While the workflow document did incorporate both company logos and was produced in the house style of the buyer, the visual aspects of the companies identities is less prominent than it was in the ITT and Tender documents. An important observation here is that the work flow document was co-produced by the buyer and supplier working together.

“I worked with George, so we had mapped out every stage of the work flow. We knew who should be doing what, and if there was a problem, how we could escalate it.” (Jack, Supplier)

The work flow document was something that emerged over time and took several iterations to achieve,

“I guess inevitably, we had teething problems, and so we needed something so that everyone could see what was supposed to be happening. I started working with [Jack] to produce work flows, and as we hit problems, we developed these... We’ve got them right now ... it’s taken several months.” (George, Buyer)

During these months, the buyer and supplier invested a lot of effort in understanding where the resources, the means to access the resources, and the control of those resources lay within each firm and across the boundaries of the two firms learning how to work together. This was a complex task as it involved

hundreds of engineers working in different geographic sites, across organisational boundaries. The complexity of the task meant that the Conditions of the inter-firm relationship were continually being reassessed. The Outcomes of a misunderstanding of the Conditions by anyone in the work flow was a 'problem' that required attention from actors from both the buyer and supplier firms. The solutions to problems often lead to the re-fixing of Rules (2nd circuit) and the Obligatory passage point was an amendment to the work flow document that was then shared with everyone.

Tentative Conclusions

This research attempts to shed light on the understanding of the role of artefacts with identity content in development of a business-to-business relationship. Our findings suggest that CI is embedded in artefacts helping buyers and suppliers define and shape both the terms of the agreement and the emergent inter-firm practices that would make the agreement work. Further, that CI embedded in artefacts helps to create common ground and shared cognitive maps of how relationships might work and how unanticipated problems might be handled. In this way artefacts became important boundary spanning objects.

Artefacts take distinct roles throughout the development of the business relationship. Following initial interactions the artefacts emerge out of the second circuit once the actors have enough understanding of each other to establish some kind of rules. At this stage guidelines define the main contents for the ITT document. Additionally the buyer becomes informed about the initial 'rules' to underpin the relationship. The leadership of the relationship is essentially from the buyer's side and the bridge is established with the second circuit. During the second circuit the ITT document is elaborated contending and specifying the aims and purposes for the relationship, being an obligatory passage point.

There is an iterative process of returning into the first circuit, where the suppliers reflect their own identities in the tender document. Again this constitutes an obligatory point of passage now in the second circuit. The rules are established and part of the power is on the suppliers' side. Throughout this process the role of the documents is prominent. Their content brings the corporate identities of both actors to the fore. The documents sustain the relationship and interactions.

The analysis revealed instances of not only the suppliers CI influencing the development of the relationship but that as the relationship developed and the buyer understood more about the CI of potential suppliers, they began to systematically reflect on their own CI too. The CI of their own and other firms in the market seemed to act as a principle reference point to guide behaviour and decisions.

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