

Creating value among business: Service's perspective contributions

Abstract

This paper discusses the role of service on the value creation process in business networks. We consider that suppliers need to be service providers in order to create value for themselves and for other firms in a net. According to the service-centred logic, services can be understood as processes for value co-creation by resources interactions among parts in business relationships. Studies have been developed to understand how the concepts of services are related within the business marketing field. Nevertheless, Jacob and Ulaga (2008) emphasize that marketing strategy development and implementation to promote the transition from goods to services in B2B markets is still unclear. The paper contributes for this discussion. The interaction and the network approaches of IMP group are discussed and the literature on Business Models is presented as a way to the understanding of how firms can fit strategic, operational and economical decisions, allowing the creation of value. Then, we discuss how goods and services are bonded in industrial systems in order to allow the co-creation of value among business. We review this literature and we suggest further research about how firms can develop business models based on services to co-create value in networks.

Keywords

Business-to-business marketing, Services marketing, Creation of value, Business services, Business models.

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This paper discusses the role of service on the value creation process in business networks. We consider that suppliers need to be service providers in order to create value for themselves and for other firms in a net. According to the service-centred logic, services can be understood as processes for value co-creation by resources interactions among parts in business relationships. Studies have been developed to understand how the concepts of services are related within the business marketing field. Nevertheless, Jacob and Ulaga (2008) emphasize that marketing strategy development and implementation to promote the transition from goods to services in B2B markets is still unclear. The paper contributes for this discussion. The interaction and the network approaches of IMP group are discussed and the literature on Business Models is presented as a way to the understanding of how firms can fit strategic, operational and economical decisions, allowing the creation of value. Then, we discuss how goods and services are bonded in industrial systems in order to allow the co-creation of value among business. We review this literature and we suggest further research about how firms can develop business models based on services to co-create value in networks.

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1. Introduction

The concept of value in business relations has been differently understood by separate perspectives. Sometimes it is expressed only in economical terms (Galé, 1994; Smith, 2002), other times it is represented as a set of economical and non-economical aspects (Nagle and Holden, 2002). In spite of these differences, value can be seen as created in the exchange of resources among firms (Johanson and Wedin, 2005). According to the Interactive Approach (Håkansson, 1982) and the Network Approach (Easton, 1992; Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Easton and Araújo, 1992; Ford, 1997), the value creation process occurs through business relationships. This way, the literature on Business Models (Morris et al, 2005; Schweizer, 2005; Magretta, 2002) has given contributions to the understanding of how firms can fit strategic, operational and economical decisions, allowing the creation of value. On the other hand, Ramirez (1999), Grönroos (2006) and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) argued that value can not be “added” to an offer. For these authors, value is co-created among several business actors and the buyer, who has a fundamental role in defining what “value” is (as a co-creator). This means that firms cannot offer value, but only suggest ways for a client to obtain value. This way, services have a fundamental role in the process of creating value (Grönroos, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004 and 2008; Ramirez,1999). For authors such as Ramirez (1999), Grönroos (2006) and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008), service is not a special type of product or something added to it. They understand services as a process (Grönroos, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004 and 2008; Ramirez,1999) that enables the value co-creation in business relationships. This way, Jacob and Ulaga (2008) state that business markets are increasingly taking over the character of service markets. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of service on the process of value creation in business networks. In order to clarify this discussion, the paper presents the network approach developed by the IMP Group. Then, the concept of value and the process of value creation are discussed and the Business Model literature is described. Finally, it's discussed the conceptual changes from a “co-production” to a “co-creation” of value, highlighting the role of services in business-to-business markets.

2. The IMP's Interactive and Network Approaches

According to Håkansson (1982), the initial project of the IMP Group was developed because researchers had observed phenomenons that could not be explained by traditional theoretical models. Until then, the microeconomics perspective predominated, based on price as a mechanism of market co-ordination, emphasizing the ability to achieve transactions at better costs in business relationships. The first publication of the IMP Group (Håkansson, 1982) was the beginning of a challenge set to

study the specificities of business markets, suggesting a structure of relations between interdependent firms, which was called Interactive Approach (Håkansson, 1982). According to this perspective, buyers and sellers are active participants of a relationship (Håkansson, 1982). For Turnbull et al (1996), the Interactive Approach considers the relationship as the analysis' unity, instead of individual transaction. This way, the interactive perspective developed by the IMP Group tries to capture the multi-dimensionality and the complexity of the inter-business relationships, where business relationships are embedded (Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Ford, 1997).

IMP Group researchers (Easton, 1992; Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Easton and Araújo, 1992; Ford, 1997) spread out the Interactive Approach and developed the Network Approach. The term network refers to the exchange connection between multiple firms that are interacting with each other (Ford et al, 2006). Relations can be seen as assets that vary in terms of content, strength and duration. It implicates costs of time and money, risks, uncertainties, and dependences (Ford et al, 2006; Ritter and Ford, 2004). This way, the management of relationships is not a linear process that leads to an ideal partnership between clients and suppliers. Both parts will try to manage the relation their own way, according to their own priorities. So, it is important to understand that the firms cannot manage the net, but can only “manage in the net” (Ford et al, 2006).

3. Managing relationships: business process

Anderson et al (1994) and Ritter and Ford (2004) emphasized that business nets are determined by the connection of relationships. For Håkansson and Snehota (1993), a relationship can be understood as an interaction mutually orientated between two reciprocally engaged parts. According to Ford (1997), business relationships can be described as complex combinations of exchanges and adaptation. The content of the exchanges can be studied according to four types: exchanges of products/services, informations, financial and social elements, which lead to a long term relationship characterized by interdependence, reciprocal adaptations and co-ordination of certain activities (Ford, 1997). Therefore, the processes of adaptation take place when one or both parts realize the potential of profit resulting from the relationship, and adapt functions, proceedings, tasks, attitudes, values, and objectives in order to obtain a better performance. Möller and Wilson (1995) agree with this idea and claim that an interaction between supplier-buyer can be described also as a process of co-ordination.

For Anderson et al (1994), a business net is built by dyadic business relationships and these are reflexes of the business net in which they are embedded. Relationships between firms may have functions divided into two different dimensions: primary and secondary. The primary functions of business relationships concern the effects, positives or negatives, for both parts that interact in a dyadic relationship. The secondary functions, named “net functions”, capture the indirect, positive or negative, effects of the relationships (Anderson et al, 1994). In an attempt to clarify this idea, Anderson et al (1994) discuss some concepts like “net horizons”, “net context” and “net’s identity”. We can understand “net horizons” as a certain firm's perception on how far does the net in which it is embedded stretches out. The “net horizons” depend on the firm's experience and on the net's structural characteristics. This means that the horizons of the net of a certain firm change according to the business relationships it develops. According to Håkansson and Snehota (1993), the part of the net's horizon considered relevant to the firm is called “net context”, and it is structured in three dimensions: actors, activities and resources (Håkansson and Snehota, 1993). It is in the context of the net that the firm develops what is called “net's identity”, i.e. how a firm sees itself in the net and how it is seen by other members of the same net. The net's identity can indicate the appeal level of the firm as a partner for business relationships and exchanges of resources. For Anderson et al (1994), firms should develop a strategic net identity, requiring a business model that allows the creation of value, as will be presented in the next section.

4. Managing value: the contribution of *Business Models*

Processes of value creation have been studied according to what is called “business models”. According to Magretta (2002), no consensus exists regarding the definition, nature, structure and development of business models. This concept is also designated by expressions such as structure, architecture, design, plan or method (Magretta, 2002). Nevertheless, Morris et al (2005) analysed 30 definitions of the term and identified three main categories of definition: economic, operational and strategic. The most rudimentary level is defining business models solely in terms of a firm's economic model, focusing on generating profit (Stewart and Zhao, 2000). At an operational level, business models represent an architectural configuration and the focus is on internal processes and infrastructure design which enable firms to create value (Mayo and Brown, 1999). On the other hand, understanding business models on a strategic level, emphasizes overall direction in the firm's market positioning, interactions across organizational boundaries, and growth opportunities (Slywotsky, 1996). According to Morris et al (2005, p. 727), business models can be understood in an integrative way: “a concise representation of how an interrelated set of decision variables in the areas of venture strategy, architecture and economics are addressed to create sustainable competitive advantage in defined markets”. According to Morris et al (2005) it is possible to envision a business model's life cycle involving periods of specification, refinement, adaptation, revision and reformulation. The dynamic characteristic of business models was studied by Schweizer (2005). For this author, firms may face the immediate need to change and adapt their business models in order to remain competitive advantages.

For Chesbrough and Rosenbloom (2002) business models can be understood as a way of mediating the value creation process, having the following functions: I) articulate the value proposition, i.e. the value created for users by the offers based on technology; II) identify a market segment, i.e., the users to whom technology is useful, for what purpose, as well as a way to specify the revenue generating mechanism(s) for the firm; III) define the structure of the value chain that the firm requires to create and distribute the offers, and determine the complementary assets needed to support the firm's position in this chain; IV) estimate the cost structures and profit potential of producing the offer, given the value proposition and the value chain structure chosen; V) describe the position of the firm within the value network linking suppliers and customers, including the identification of potential complementers and competitors; and VI) formulate competitive strategies by which the innovating firm will gain and hold advantage over rivals. According to Morris et al (2005), Schweizer (2005), Chesbrough and Rosenbloom (2002) and Magretta (2002) business models can be seen as a way to define and implement a process of value creation. Nevertheless, Ramirez (1999), Lovelock and Gummesson (2004), Grönroos (2006), and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) have claimed the importance of understanding the value creation as a co-production and a co-creation process. Next we will describe what implies this conceptual change.

5. Creating value in industrial networks

Value is a well-known and venerable concept in business markets (Anderson, 2004). But, there isn't a consensus about its meaning. Sometimes it is expressed only in economical terms (Galé, 1994; Smith, 2002), other times it is represented as a set of economical and non-economical aspects, such as market-perceived quality, total savings or satisfaction received (Nagle and Holden, 2002). According to Anderson (2004), each of these constituent components takes our understanding of the concept in a different direction. But it is only through an integrative perception of the term, i.e., by the conjunction of economical and non-economical aspects, that the process of value can be understood (Anderson, 2004).

According to Johanson and Wedin (2005), the process of value creation has been studied from the value chain perspective (Porter, 1985), to constellations of value (Normann and Ramirez, 1993), to systems of value (Porter, 1996) and to a network perspective (Stabell and Fjeldstad, 1998; Johanson and Wedin, 2005; Amit and Zott, 2001). But, according to Stabell and Fjeldstad (1998), the process of value creation can be seen in three different perspectives: “value chain”, “value shops” and “value in networks”. Stabell and Fjeldstad (1998) agree with the concept that value creation on a value chain perspective (Porter, 1985) occurs when a firm produces standardized offers

and costs are the element that has a fundamental role in defining the value. On the other hand, there is a “value shop” when the firm creates value through activities solving specific client problems. In these cases, the main assets of the firm are the capacity of specialization. Stabell and Fjeldstad (1998) also claim that when the critical value of a firm comes from established business relationships in a net that is called value in network. In these cases, value is created by activities in a network of business relationships, mediated by technologies. Both costs and business relationships are factors driving the creation of value. This way, Ramirez (1999), Lovelock and Gummesson (2004), Grönroos (2006) and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) emphasize the change from a process of creation of value to a process of “co-production” (Ramirez, 1999) and “co-creation” of value (Grönroos, 2006; Vargo and Lusch 2004, 2008). This change highlights customer’s participating in the value creation process, in which services have a fundamental role.

6. From Co-Production to Co-Creation of Value: Goods and Services Together

For Ramirez (1999), value creation process is not unidirectional, but co-invented and combined through interactions among several economical actors. It’s necessary to move from the industrial view of value to a co-productive perception of the term, according to the Table 1:

Table 1: From an Industrial to a Co-Productive View of Value

INDUSTRIAL VIEW	CO-PRODUCTIVE VIEW
Value creation is sequential, unidirectional, transitive, best described in value chains	Value creation is synchronic, interactive, best described in value constellation
All managed values can be measured in monetary terms	Some managed values cannot be measured monetarily
Value is added	Value is co-invented, combined and reconciled
Value is a function of utility and rarity	Exchanges the source of utility and rarity
Values are “objective” (exchange) and “subjective” (utility)	Values are contingent and actual (established interactively)
Customers destroy value	Customers co-create value
Value is only achieved once, at transaction, and only for the supplier (event)	Value is co-produced with the customers over time – for both co-producers (relationship)
Services are a “seperate” activity	Services is a framework for all activities considered as co-production
Customers are not a production factor	Costumers are managed as a production factor (assets)
The economic actors are analysed as holding one primary role at a time	The economic actors are analysed as holding several different roles simultaneously
The firms and the activity are the units of analysis	Interactions (offerings) are the units of analysis

Source: adapted from Ramirez (1999, p.61)

According to Ramirez (1999), value is interactively co-produced by relationships with customers, as co-creators. Value is contingent and actual, i.e, is co-invented, combined and reconciled by dynamics relationships. By this way, Ramirez (1999) highlights the role of services, as a framework with which to think of value creation. This change for the concept of service agrees with what is called service-centred logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004 and 2008; Groonros, 2006). Since Lovelock and Gummesson (2004) contested the validity and continued usefulness of the IHIP (intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability) as a core paradigm to differentiate services from goods (Fisk et al, 1993), several studies have been trying to understand the impact of this conceptual change for business markets (Reinartz and Ulaga, 2008; Cova and Salle, 2008; Campbell-Kelly and Garcia-Swartz, 2007; Teboul, 2006; Oliva and Kallenberg, 2003; Chesbrough and Rosenbloom, 2002).

Gebauer (2008) emphasized this perspective highlighting the challenge to move from a good based logic, to a service-centred logic. According to Grönroos (2006), the evolution of the service-centred logic was influenced by traditional authors from the Nordic School (Grönroos and Gummesson, 1985) and, more recently, by Vargo and Lusch (2008), who discussed what they called Service-Dominant Logic (S-DL). According to the S-DL, services must be understood as the application of specialized capacities (knowledges and skills) exchanged through business relationships (Vargo and Lusch, 2004 and 2008). For authors such as Ramirez (1999), Grönroos (2006) and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008), service is not a special type of product or something added to it. They understand services as a process (Grönroos, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004 and 2008; Ramirez, 1999) that enables the value co-creation in business relationships. This way, according to Oliva and Kallenberg (2003), to move from a good based logic, to service centred logic, firms have to adopt an unique service orientation, developing what is called Installed Base of Services (IB Service). An IB Service is the range of process related services required by an end-user over the useful life of a product in order to run it effectively in the context of its operating process. The firm must identify a profit opportunity within the service arena and set up the structures and process to exploit it. Oliva and Kallenberg (2003) highlight that the IB Service allows an industrial firm to enhance its profitability offering services that could be bought by long-term contracts. This perspective changes the way services are priced: from a mark-up for labour and parts every time a service is provided, to a fixed price covering all services over an agreed period.

According to Gebauer (2008), Teboul (2006), Grönroos (2006) and Oliva and Kallenberg (2003), traditional product-manufacturing companies have to change their position in the goods-services continuum by continuously extending the service business in their offers. For this to happen, firms “may decide that providing services is beyond the scope of their competencies (...)” and therefore “not only are new capabilities, metrics and incentives needed, but also the emphasis of the business model changes from transactions to relationship-based” (Oliva and Kallenberg, 2003, p.161). This way, the product becomes part of the offering and the firm must develop services to support and improve continuously its use and effectiveness. According to Ramirez (1999), Grönroos (2006), and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) a firm is a “solution-provider” and must identify the customer’s needs to offer value propositions. But value is uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary, as a co-creator. By this way, Jacob and Ulaga (2008) affirms that the service-centred logic is in accordance and reinforces the Network Approach (Easton, 1992; Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Easton and Araújo, 1992; Ford, 1997) developed by the IMP Group. Both literatures are client-oriented, relational and developed in an interactive settings (Jacob and Ulaga, 2008)

According to the theoretical review developed in this paper, the Interactive and Network approach shows that firms are connected by relationships and are embedded in business networks (Easton, 1992; Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Easton and Araújo, 1992; Ford, 1997). Processes of value are achieved in business networks through business models based on relationships (Morris et al, 2005; Schweizer, 2005 and Chesbrough and Rosenbloom (2002). But the concept of value must be understood as a process of co-creation and all firms, including manufactures, must be service providers in order to create value (Reinartz e Ulaga, 2008; Cova e Salle, 2008; Campbell-Kelly and Garcia-Swartz, 2007; Teboul, 2006; Oliva and Kallenberg, 2003, and Chesbrough and Rosenbloom, 2002). Transforming a manufacturing firm into a service provider means having to adopt a business model based on relationships and develop profitable services offers (Oliva and Kallenberg, 2003). Nevertheless, Jacob and Ulaga (2008) emphasize that the literature on the transition from product to service in business-to-business markets is still at an early stage. For these authors, business markets are being urged to move from product to service, but marketing strategy development and the implementation to promote this change is still unclear. In the same string of thought, Ford and Håkansson (2006) highlight the importance of moving from a theoretical to a managerial perspective. This review and confrontation of literature suggests that a clear managerial understanding of how industrial firms (not only creates, but also) co-create value in networks is needed. What types of business models allows the co-creation of value? How can industrial suppliers find strategic, operational and economical decisions allowing the co-creation of value with others actors in the net?

How can they sell these services profitably? How can they develop and sell services in order to co-create value?

This way, there is a field to be explored regarding the services' role in the business market. Business-to-Business Services Marketing literature has been developed to answer questions which emerged from the specificities of some services (professional services, financial services etc.) and the difficulty that managers had in buying services, compared to physical goods (easier to control). Studies such as Van Der Valk (2008), Van Der Valk et al (2007), Proença and Castro (2007), Grönroos (2007), Wynstra et al (2006), Proença and Castro (2004) and Axelsson and Wynstra (2002) have been developing ways to identify the main differential aspects, as well as trying to characterize different types of services. It was found that each type of service requires specific relations between the firm and the provider of the service. But, the exploration of the service literature in B2B field must also be able to focus on service(s) that are a process linking business, allowing a value co-creation network.

7. Conclusion

An integrative perspective between service-centred logic and the Network Approach developed by IMP Group shows that processes of value co-creation among firms in a network are achieved through relationships and by the application of services. This paper highlights the role that services can have to business-to-business marketing. Through the premises of the service-centred logic, firms, essentially, exchange services (involving more or less tangible things). If service is an application of technologies through dynamic relationships, the management of the processes of service(s) in business can still illuminate the field of business processes and the co-creation of value among firms. Further exploratory and descriptive research based on service management processes must be developed in order to design business models that allow the co-creation of value. The focus will not be on the offer (more or less tangible), but rather on the services, which are processes linking businesses in the net and co-creating value.

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