
CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE AND VALUE CO-CREATION IN SOLUTION BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

Solution business can offer new sources of income for traditional manufacturing companies, but the business model differs radically from the traditional product-centric view. One of the key differences to product business is the depth of co-creation between the supplier and the customer. This co-creation covers the whole customer relationship, starting from the offering creation and continuing towards the end of the solution lifecycle. The booming academic interest on solution business has mainly, with a few exceptions, focused on the supplying side of the dyadic relationship. As customer solutions are co-created, the views and opinions of customers form a fruitful research topic. The paper concentrates on customer perceptions of value co-creation and relationship dynamics during the different relational processes in solution business. The study contributes to the growing solution marketing literature stream by providing a conceptual model customer co-creation activities in the relational solution process.

Keywords: solution marketing, co-creation, value co-creation, customer value, customer solution, solution process

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INTRODUCTION

New business growth opportunities through providing customer solutions have encouraged companies to reorient their business logics. Supplier's value-creation potential is increased by moving up and downwards in the value chain. Offering "power by the hour" (e.g. Cohen et al. 2006) instead of separate products and service contracts can convert customer needs into profitable business. Customer solutions are often linked to the ability to create "unique value" (Miller et al. 2002; Davies et al 2006). Brax & Jonsson (2009) argue that although this unique value has several attributes found in different studies, the common denominator is customer focus. Bundles of services and products created in cooperation with a customer, described as "customer", "integrated", "business", or "total" solutions, have recently received increasing interest in the academia as well (e.g. Nordin & Kowalkowski 2010). This cooperation is emphasized also in the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch 2004), which highlights the close cooperation relationship between the supplier and the customer (Lusch & Vargo 2006; Vargo et al. 2008). Deep understanding of customer's business should be gained through effective and enduring relationships with customers (Shepherd & Ahmed, 2000). There seems to be, however, a mismatch between the reality and literature, because many of the "solution provider" companies do not have extensive collaboration with their customers (Sawhney 2006).

Close co-operation between suppliers and customers is a key characteristic for solution business by its definition (Cornet et al. 2000; Sawhney 2006). As opposed to product-centric and transactional supply of goods and services, providing customer solutions is seen as relational processes between the customer and the supplier (Tuli et al., 2007). However, previous studies on customer solutions have commonly focused on the supplying side of customer solutions. Although there has been a few customer-oriented research papers (e.g. Tuli et al. 2007; Brax & Jonsson 2009), we acknowledge the lack of detailed studies on customer perception of solution process in industrial business as a major research gap. If co-creation (Tuli et al., 2007) and effective customer relationships (Shepherd & Ahmed, 2000) are the key aspects of solutions, then it should be vital to address also the customer perspective. The need for further research on customer perspective of solution is acknowledged also by Tuli et al. (2007) and Jacob & Ulaga (2008).

Accordingly, the purpose of the paper is to shed light on customer perceptions of value co-creation in the context of the complex and service-intensive customer solutions. We address the following research questions: 1) How the relationship dynamics change between the supplier and the customer during the solution process? and 2) What value co-creation customer processes there are during the relational solution process? The study contributes to solution business literature by advancing understanding on customer perceptions of co-creation of value and through which actions the value is co-created during the solution process.

SOLUTION BUSINESS AS RELATIONAL PROCESSES

The transformation from product supplier to solution provider has recently received increasing academic interest (e.g. Davies et al. 2006; Jacob & Ulaga 2008; Brax & Jonsson 2009; Nordin & Kowalkowski 2010; Salonen forth.). However, providing profitable solutions has proved to be difficult (Krishnamurthy et al. 2003). While examining the causes for servitization difficulties, Neely (2008) pointed out the insufficient understanding of customer

perception of value. It seems that a major challenge with previous literature is that most of it has neglected customer focus (Tuli et al. 2007).

Customer is mainly interest on the value it receives and somewhat neglects how the supplier delivers it. Customer solutions are a way to deliver unique value to customers (Davies et al 2006). The solution concept has a variety of definitions (Nordin & Kowalkowski 2010), many of which list merely the ingredients. According to Stremersch et al. (2001), solution is a “unique combination of numerous elements which will contribute to producing value for the customer” whereas the solution provider is “a supplier of complex offerings, delivering value for the customer in close cooperation with the customer”. In the context of traditional manufacturer companies, solutions are usually based on some sort of physical element, for example, a paper machine. In addition, there are numerous types of service elements implemented in various phases of the solution life cycle (Arto et al. 2007). Within all these definitions, value can be found as the combining ingredient.

However, solution business is about interacting with customers to find a suitable way to produce added value for the customer. The above definitions represent merely snapshots of solution elements. In practice solutions are longitudinal and relational processes. In their study, Tuli et al. (2007) presented a four-stage process-centric model of solution business. They argue that solution business is well in line with the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch 2004) and the shift from transactions to relationships (Ballantyne & Varey 2006). According to Tuli et al. (2007), a solution provider must succeed in four process phases; *requirements definition (RD)*, *customizing and integration (CI)*, *deployment (DE)*, and *postdeployment support (PS)*. Solution *requirement definition* is time consuming. Customers often have difficulties in specifying the precise requirements for the solution. Also, suppliers should understand the surroundings of customer’s business needs, both present and future, more comprehensively. This can be only done by cooperating before the actual offer specification. In the *customizing and integration* phase, suppliers have to adapt the customers’ current systems and seek fully-working combination of different goods/services elements. *Deployment* phase refers to many possible further adjustments faced during the installation process, as well as training and other people-related aspects. Finally, *postdeployment support* expands over the traditional spare part and maintenance offerings by reacting with the customers’ new demands and requirements. This final phase underlines the ongoing relationship characteristic of solution business. Tuli et al. (2007) present a well argued relational solution process model which is heavily co-created between the supplier and the customer. Next, we will examine the value co-creation literature.

Co-creation of value

Grönroos (2008) emphasizes the role of the service (solution) provider as a facilitator and co-creator of value instead of a sole creator of the value. However, the academic knowledge of value co-creation is still developing (Woodruff & Flint 2006; Payne et al. 2008). Direct interactions with the customer’s value creation processes are dominant when business is based on service logic. Like in any collaborative relationship, also in value co-creation of industrial solutions, there can be various motives for deeper collaboration. Solution provider’s targeted benefits are typically related to creation of new business, to volume growth and to improvement of the competitive position. Client’s targeted benefits are usually related to efficiency of its own operations and production process, and furthermore, networking of several service providers and customers generally aim to benefit from

acquisition of resources and development of specific competences. Our focus here is to understand the customer side of the co-creation process.

Value-in-use thinking (e.g. Vargo et al., 2008) puts the focus on the customer's value creation processes and the auxiliary role of services in these. The deeper the aimed partnership in industrial b-to-b environment, the more important is the need for a detailed analysis of the value co-creation process. For example, in industrial maintenance services and solutions, the depth of the partnership may vary from a conventional transaction-based maintenance and repair work to performance partnerships or even to advanced value partnerships and full-service contracts and solutions (e.g. Stremersch et al., 2001). Our main interest is in these latter options. In this case the full understanding of customer value creation process is essential. The value creation process can include co-development of services and solutions (e.g. Alam, 2002; Thomke & von Hippel, 2002) as well as co-production of the solution (e.g. Brax & Jonsson, 2009).

The earlier studies and experiences of developing co-creation relationships between Finnish solution providers and their clients (e.g. Ojanen et al., 2010; Ahonen et al., 2010) have revealed some focus areas related to value co-creation of large industrial solution offerings: 1) Identification of the potential of the common value is essential to strengthen the customer perspective. The common value perspective is based on deriving the customer needs, potential benefits for the customer and benefits to the solution provider to a clear picture of mutual benefits. 2) Building a full understanding of the common value means understanding all the elements of value and their causal relationships as well as possible. Often the emphasis in related literature has been on the required capabilities of suppliers (e.g. Feeny et al., 2005), but in co-creation of value, it is also essential to note that customers should also develop and leverage their capabilities to fully understand the benefits, processes and cost structures involved. This understanding can be potentially promoted via moving step by step towards more advanced services and solutions. 3) Communicating the value in many cases may be the most crucial step in the process. In complex and large solution entities, the amount of information and participating people is large. Therefore, systematic tools to construct the holistic view of the whole solution and to support the decision-making are necessary for structuring the message to all parties involved. 4) Realization of the common value by measuring the relationship development is also finally needed. The relationship evolves dynamically, and situations and participating people may change. In order to develop the mutual trust and the co-creation procedure, there have to be both qualitative and quantitative measures from both supplier's and customer's perspective.

If we reflect the above-mentioned discussion to the relational process perspective of solutions by Tuli et al. (2007), it seems that identifying the value potential, understanding the common value and communicating it are all essential already in planning of how to practically implement the co-creation, i.e. in *requirements definition* phase, and in *customizing and integration* phase. Monitoring co-creation process is essential in *deployment* and *post-deployment stages* to guarantee the realization of the value. When discussing about large, complex entities of solution offerings, there is a need to stress the front-end part of co-creation process, which is a prerequisite to succeeding in co-production of value and partnership during the whole asset life cycle.

To sum up, customers should be able to participate in each phase of the customized solution creation, from the *requirements definition* to *postdeployment support*, giving opportunities for mutual learning through dialogue (Ballantyne 2004). Payne et al. (2008) constructed a

conceptual value co-creation framework with three components: customer value-creating processes, supplier value-creating processes, and encounter processes. Korkman (2006) argues that the customer uses practices as a set of routinized actions in a relationship. He suggests that the value is inside these practices and that the supplier should build value by improving these practices. Here, our interested is through which customer processes the customer organizes the co-creation actions relating to a specific solution process. We will take these processes and try to understand their role in co-creation with our case focus group sessions. First, a brief look at the customer value literature.

Customer value

The understanding of customer value is vital to business suppliers, and this is well echoed in the wealth of research attention dedicated to this area (e.g. Payne & Holt, 2001; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005; Anderson et al., 2006; Ulaga, 2011). Evolving from traditional product-centric view (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), customer value theory have been shifting towards relational view, where customer value is co-created in customer's processes as a value-in-use, through managing customer relationships (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Grönroos, 2008). Although scholars agree that customer value is a trade-off between all the relevant benefits and costs delivered by an offering through its lifetime (e.g. Flint et al., 1997; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Blocker, 2011), in practice customers and suppliers have often different perceptions about what constitutes value for them (Ulaga & Eggert, 2005; Anderson et al., 2006; Möller, 2006; Corsaro & Snehota, 2010).

Customer value is considered as a unique and context-bound subjective perception, determined by customer, not by supplier (Zeithaml, 1988; Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Corsaro & Snehota, 2010) and evaluated in relative to competitive offerings (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Anderson et al, 2006). Contemporary customer value research identifies three sources of value creation in industrial business relationships with their corresponding benefit and cost dimensions, illustrated in Table 1 (e.g. Cannon & Homburg, 2001; Ulaga, 2003; Menon et al., 2005; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005; 2006).

Table 1. Value drivers in key supplier relationships (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006).

Sources of value creation	Relationship value dimensions	
	Benefits	Costs
Core offering	Product quality Delivery performance	Direct costs
Sourcing process	Service support Personal interaction	Acquisition costs
Customer operations	Supplier know-how Time-to-market	Operation costs

However, majority of the studies exploring customer's perception of value in industrial markets have focused on companies providing physical goods (Cannon & Homburg, 2001; Ulaga, 2003; Menon et al., 2005; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), whose value is often relatively straightforward to assess. In contrast, customer solutions are complex and service-intensive by nature, making it difficult to assess their value objectively (Brady et al., 2005; Sawhney, 2006). Customers might perceive additional value dimensions in settings extending beyond traditional manufacturer-supplier relationships (Ulaga & Eggert, 2005), and preliminary research suggests that the value provided by customer solutions varies depending on contextual conditions (Worm, Ulaga & Zitzlsperger, 2009). In addition to the variety of exchanged products and services, providing customer solutions requires also constant

interaction and reciprocal adaptation (Tuli et al., 2007; Windahl & Lakemond, 2010). Menon et al. (2005) noticed that joint working arrangements will increase the customer's perception of value, which highlights the importance of close co-operation and customer's active involvement. The co-operation and enhanced customer participation in the value creation process leads us to our conceptual model for customer perspective of value co-creation in solution business.

Conceptual model on customer value in solution business

Solution business means creating new business models and earning logics through innovative thinking between suppliers and customers. Based on the unique nature of solutions, the value co-creation process cannot be formulated into too constrained model. As we focus on the customer side, we focus on customer processes. Our model, see Figure 1, utilizes the four-phase solution model by Tuli et al. (2007). Although they did not study their model within manufacturers in capital goods industry, we believe it will offer a good framework for our research purpose. We seek for the actual processes customers undertake during the solution process. This is done by scrutinizing all the phases independently. We also divide the four phases into front-end (RD & CI) and back-end (DE & PS) phases. The front-end of solution process concentrates on the planning of the solution, while the back-end focuses on the execution and support activities.

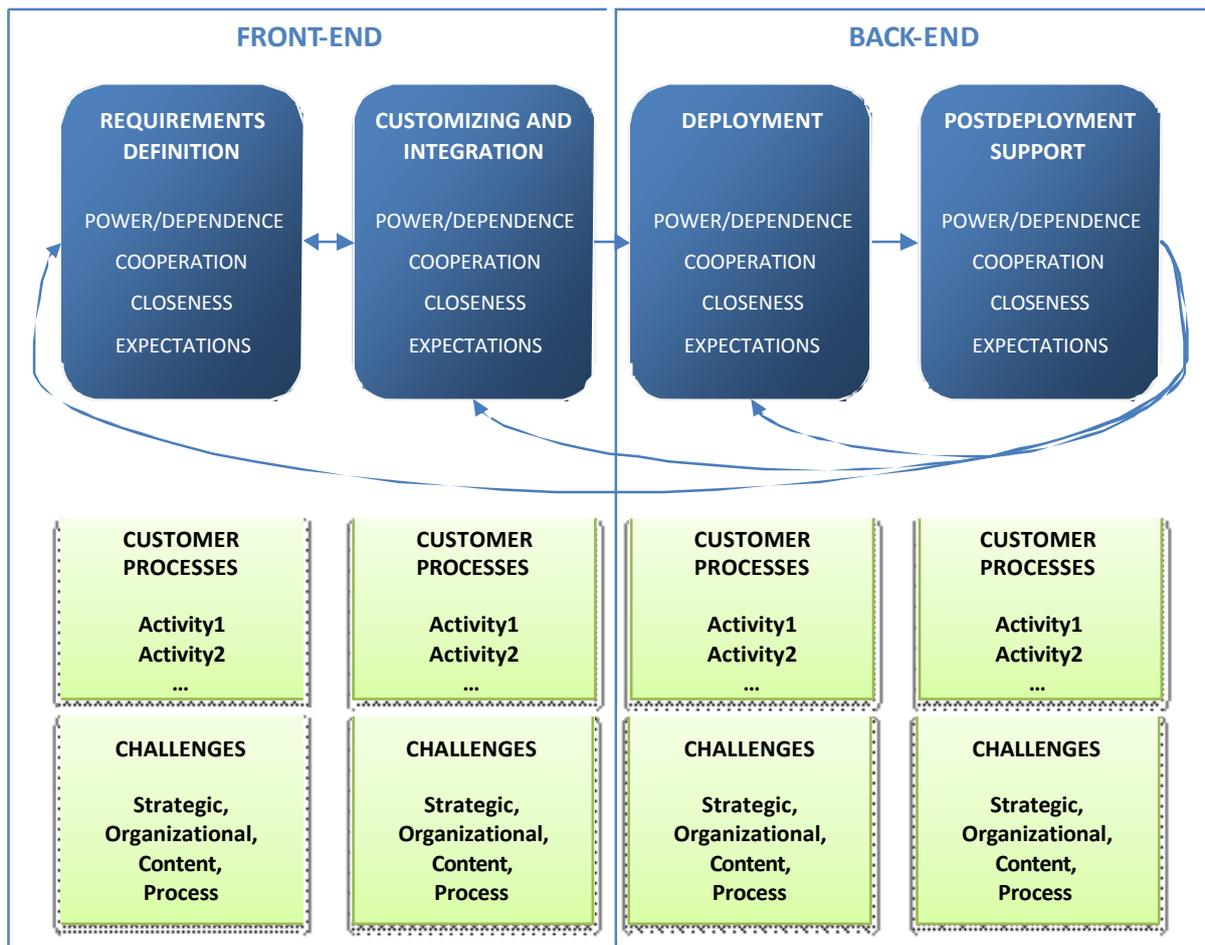


Figure 1. Conceptual model on customer's perspective of value co-creation activities in solution process

The dyadic relationship between the supplier and the customer is dynamic (Håkansson, 1982). Hence, we will use the traditional IMP interaction model to model the atmosphere during each solution process phase. The four atmosphere attributes are power/dependence, cooperation, closeness, and expectations (Håkansson, 1982). Here, the power/dependence describes the power relation between the participants and its dynamics. Cooperation and closeness relates to the strength and volume of co-creation actions. Expectations are seen as value measuring efforts. Furthermore, we will attach iterative nature of innovation processes to our model. The iteration possibilities are shown with arrows in our model, see Figure 1. Possible iterations are needed when the actual solution is unclear at the beginning of the process – as unique customer solutions often are. Therefore, suppliers and customers will likely go back and forth when working together to find a suitable solution, especially during the front-end phases of the process. During the postdeployment support phase, customer needs might change or new technologies emerge which will lead to significant changes and thus, a step down in the solution process.

However, the challenges and risks need to be understood and studied from supplier's, customer's and common perspectives. Challenges may be divided to multiple categories, e.g. to strategic, organizational, content and process challenges (Doz & Hamel, 1998). The content-related challenges may exist throughout the co-creation process, but the focus of the content challenges may naturally differ from planning to implementation. In addition to relational process approaches, co-creation can also be linked to life cycle approaches. The co-creation as a whole can be seen as a continuous process that is carried on throughout the lifecycle of the industrial asset, for example a large industrial equipment (e.g. paper machine) and variety of related services for this machinery, e.g. planning, support, training and maintenance services.

In the model, we describe customer process activities (Payne et al., 2008; Korkman, 2006) and four types of challenges (Doz & Hamel, 1998) in each of the four phases. The activities can vary during the process from sharing information to measuring performance. Each activity is then analyzed based on its strategic, organizational, content and process challenges to the customer.

RESEARCH METHOD

We approach value and co-creation in solution business from the customer mindset through real world case evidence. The research problem is examined by adopting an abductive research logic, which involves systematic combining of both theoretical and empirical aspects to gain a holistic understanding of the focal phenomenon (Dubois & Gadde 2002; Kovács & Spens 2005). The study is made as a qualitative multiple case study (Yin 2003), making the selection of the case companies vital (Dubois & Araujo 2007). To enhance the level of generalizability (Eisenhardt 1989), we selected four business-to-business customer companies which have recently acquired rather complex customer solutions. The customer cases are acquired through our research project on solution business.

We adapt a similar method as Tuli et al. (2007) and use focus group method for data collection. This allows us to understand how people form shared conceptions (Morgan 1997; Barbour & Kitchinger 1999). There will be one group session in each of the firms followed by an email approval round to eliminate possible misunderstandings.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

As the paper aims to discover customer's value perceptions in solution business, the results will clarify how customers view the value of a solution by identifying different value elements. Furthermore, the results will shed light on the co-creation of these value elements between suppliers and customers. At this point, however, we can only make assumptions what the empirical results might bring into our knowledge.

The first research question will provide us valuable knowledge on the relationship dynamics during the solution process. Starting with the front-end of solution process, we expect that the customer interaction and value co-creation efforts with the supplier are heaviest during the requirements definition and customizing and integration phases of the solution process. We also expect that these two phases (RD & CI) will be closely linked and involve perhaps multiple iteration rounds before moving on to deployment. The customer is also suspected to measure its perceived value by qualitative measures in the RD & CI phases. Finally, regarding to RD & CI phases, our presumption is that leadership will rotate from customer (RD) to supplier (CI). These four attributes will most likely alternate when moving towards the back-end of solution process. The deployment (DE) and postdeployment support (PS) phases are supposed to have quite straight-forward nature with less iteration. Also the co-creation activities might have a minor role in the DE phase, but it is supposed to strengthen towards the PS phase. Customer is expected to utilize both qualitative and quantitative value measurements in the back-end of solution process, more précised ones especially during the PS phase. Furthermore, the leadership is expected to rotate from supplier (DE) back to customer (PS). Lastly, the final PS phase might invoke actions relating to some earlier solution phases, and thus starting the solution process at least partly again.

The second research question focuses on the actual activities taking place during the process. While it is unnecessary to speculate which activities there are and when they occur, we can hypothesize how the challenges might evolve over time during the process. In the front-end phases of the value co-creation process, the strategic and organizational challenges are assumed to be of most interest. Furthermore, during the back-end of solution process, there is need to overcome the challenges in sub-processes, in e.g. managing the processes of information and knowledge.

The results contribute mainly to the growing solution marketing literature stream by providing insights into customer perceptions of solution value and how value is co-created during the four-stage solution process. Our study offers fruitful knowledge also for supplier managers. Managerial implications will include aspects of supporting customer involvement in solution co-creation. For the customer side, our study can provide guidelines when assessing possible solution business offerings. Due to the narrow data set and qualitative research approach, however, the generalizability of the results should be further enhanced by conducting a more comprehensive data collection or even a quantitative study.

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