Exploring the ability of Relationship Marketing to integrate Just-in-Time and efficient Business Processes to drive Brand Preferences of Customers in Industrial Networks

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Abstract

Ensuring availability of a product at a time when its demand arises forms an important element of business management practices, however, its integration with marketing influences brand preferences of customers in industrial networks of brands. Brand relationships have been understood as an important marketing tool for managing business customers. This paper conceptualizes role of relationship marketing in successful management of time and business processes for driving preferences of business customers in industrial networks of international brands. The literature was reviewed to conceptualise the role of relationship marketing in successfully addressing opportunities available to brands through their industrial networks and it was empirically found that relationship marketing enables a brand to follow just-in-time approach and strengthen its business processes that makes it attractive for industrial networks.

Key words: Brand Relationships, Relationship Marketing, Just-in-time approach, Business Process management, Demand management

1. **Introduction**

Research has demonstrated a direct correlation between business conducted through industrial networks and opportunities available to a brand (Dwyer *et al.* 1987). The business management practices of a brand also play a significant role in enabling it to capture selling opportunities in industrial markets (Dwyer, 1998; Srinivasan et al., 2002). Integrating marketing and business management strategies empower efficient management of consumers by smoothly fulfilling their requirements through industrial networks (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Ability of a brand to identify right business customers and make its products available to consumers through them can be linked backward to brand's ability to make the product available to business customer at a time when they have an opportunity to sell (Webster, 1992; Beverland, 2003).

Academic literature bases the theory of customer management by brands around relationship management, highlighting the connection between branding and relationship marketing (Dowling and Uncles, 1997; Reinartz and Kumar 2000). The objective of relationship marketing by a brand in an industrial market is to ensure that business customers understand the uniqueness of the value contributed by the brand to their business (Gronroos, 2004; Gupta *et al.*, 2010). Brands try to accomplish their business objectives by strengthening their brand value for managing demand of their product and encouraging business customers to stay in a relationship with the brand through relationship marketing (Lau and Lee, 1999).

Webster (1992) proposed that relationship marketing strategies should be integrated with efficient implementation of business processes and applied to industrial markets for successfully addressing the consumer demand. Industrial relationships are built with the objective of conducting smooth relational exchanges. These relationships are based upon interactions between business customers and brand (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Utilitarian approach provides a new dimension to brand management in industrial networks by proposing that mutual understanding and co-operated management of consumer demand by both brand managers and business customers influences preferences of business customers (Lapierre, 1997). The resource based view explains the contributions made by business customers to the ability of the brand to fulfill requirements of its consumers and just-in-time theory highlights the importance of efficient business processes in driving the preferences of customers (Collins, 1991; Handfield, 1993). Academic researchers have studied the benefits and implications of these theories in the form of different frameworks (Schroeder et al., 2002; Brodie et al., 2008). However, they have not considered integrating management theories with marketing theories for understanding the role of brand relationships in time and business process management of brands for influencing preferences of business customers. The explanation of two constructs under investigation by this study when viewed from brand relationship perspective can be found in the operations management literature (Gunasekaran and Ngai, 2005; Yeo and Lai, 2007). Lambert and Cooper (2000) highlighted role of timely managed information in management of fluctuations in customer demand and its impact on supplier's performance based on its linkages with manufacturing and supply chain processes of the brand. Timely coordination of business processes with customers in industrial networks helps brands to utilize mutual resources and capitalize opportunities available (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996). Brand relationships have the ability to drive opportunity management processes for brands operating through industrial networks and preparing business customers to act in favour of the brand in a timely manner (Dowling and Uncles, 1997; Duncan and Morarity, 1998). Although the management of relationships with business customers is a well-researched area, its impact on ability of brand to manage preferences of its customers in industrial networks using time and business related approach has not been studied previouusly. The objective of this research is to address this gap in the existing literature and improve the understanding of academics and practitioners about the role of relationship marketing in managing time and business process of brands in industrial markets. This research conceptualises the impact of this integration using theoretical understanding to understand the influence of brand relationships on two identified constructs namely time and business process management from the context of industrial markets.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

Marketing of products through industrial networks is seen as a compounding social and business process (Larson, 1991; Luo, 2007). Social behaviour and marketing literature acknowledges the contribution of relationship marketing as a basic requirement for management of business conducted through industrial networks. Ojasalo (2004) referred to management of business relationships in industrial markets as a set of actions performed by brands to achieve their objectives by mobilizing business processes for timely addressing the opportunities available to sell to consumers. Mudambi and Agarwal (2003) recognized the complexity of situation for brands that sell to consumers through business customers and argued that they are equally responsive to the needs of both the business customers and consumers. Such arguments support the philosophy that consumers and business customers should be targeted with attractive offers at the right time with an aim of retaining them for a longer period (Kumar 2002; Gummesson, 2004). Retention of business customers requires marketing programmes to collaborate with business processes so that they can not only addresses problems of customers but also provide them solutions that can enable customers to make decisions in favour of the brand (Dowling and Uncles, 1997; Duncan and Morarity, 1998). The linkage of the given constructs i.e. time and business processes in an industrial setting has been described many times in the organizational behaviour and supply chain literature but lacks attention of marketing researchers (Harland, 1996; Tan, 2001; Heikkila, 2002). This study synthesises different marketing, organizational behaviour and business management theories in order to understand the ability of relationship marketing to enable the brand to successfully adopt just-in-time approach to satisfy rational requirements of business customers and efficiently manage its business processes in industrial networks to keep business customers attracted to the brand.

Industrial Networks

Industrial business networks of brands have been defined from various perspectives in the academic literature (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996; Halinen and Tornroos, 1998; Achrol, 1999). Economists consider industrial networks as a group of small and medium sized organizations which enable firms to explore an agent based business model as a pathway to achieve its economical, transactional and social objectives (Biggart and Castanias, 2001; Bell et al., 2003; Westerlund et al., 2008). Operations and management research studies explain industrial networks as supply networks that fulfill the commercial requirements of an organization (Harland *et al.,* 1999; Christopher and Juttner, 2000; Statdler, 2005). Literature on innovation highlights industrial networks as a source that provides local resources, market information and consumer knowledge (Tsai, 2001; Chen, 2003). Business relationship theory argues that industrial networks are groups of commercial entities that facilitate exchange of resources for smooth functioning of business processes (Achrol, 1999; Fung et al., 2007). Theory of brand relationships adopts a cognitive approach to facilitate relational exchanges with business customers by allowing business customers to use its resources for successfully addressing their own and consumer needs (Srivastava *et* al.,1998; Bhattacharya and Sen,2003; Laplume *et al*., 2009).

Industrial Relationships of Brands

As indicated by the organizational behaviour literature business relationships are influenced by various explicit i.e. functional and implicit i.e. social characteristics of an organization (Blois, 1999; Woodside and Wilson,, 2000). In an industrial network a brand's explicit aspects highlight business processes of the organization behind the brand while implicit view reflects upon the behavioural and relational aspects of the organization (Gundlach *et al*., 1995; Gulati and Gargiulo, 1999). Functional characteristics of the brand ensure business customers about availability of its products while behavioural characteristics such as value and care for its business customers demonstrated by the brand during transactional events determine the strength and life of their relationship (Reinartz and Kumar, 2000). A combination of both functional and behavioural aspects of the brand helps business customers to make rational and emotional sense of the brand operating through industrial networks (Payne *et al.,*2008).

The corporate brand management literature reflects on the benefits of consistently but strategically developing relationships with customers as individuals operating in industrial networks (Melewar and Saunders, 2000**).** The communication based marketing model when applied to industrial networks links individuals operating in a network through communications (Duncan and Moriarty 1998) and explains that receivers interpret and use the information available to them from their own perspectives (Cornelissen 2000). Messages communicated by brands to business customers by individuals operating in industrial networks influences customers understanding of the business processes and approaches adopted by the brand (Dowling and Uncles, 1997). Ability of business customers to use this information and interpret it to satisfy their rational and emotional requirements influences their relationship with the brand at a cognitive level (Day 1994, Kumar, 2002).

The theory of Bernstein (1984) explains the methods used by brands to communicate their functional and behavioural aspects to customers. Van Riel and Balmer (1997) reflects on advantages of adopting different strategies to ensure that customers are aware of brand's ability to address requirements of customers. Relationship marketing strategy adopted by brands for industrial networks supports them to communicate complex but realistic and relevant aspects of the brand and to ensure that customers are clear about the functional and behavioural facets of the brand, their understanding is not diffused and it aids the strength of the relationship (Stephens et al., 2005; Boorom et al., 1998; Day, 1998). In competitive markets brands engage their customers by explaining the sources from where business customers can procure the products of the brand and the process followed by the brand to ensure that it is available to its business customers to sell (Wind and Rangaswamy, 2001; Boorom et al., 1998; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). The perception of customers about business processes followed by the brand stimulates a comparative intelligence that develops an understanding of distinctiveness about the brand (Mcgrath, 2005). In industrial networks, these benefits can be noticed when business customers talk favourably about the brand and acknowledge robustness and suitability of its processes as one of its main strengths (Powell and Powell, 2004; Lavie *et al.,* 2007).

Role of Time in Brand Relationships

The industrial market of a brand is a network of its business relationships developed with customer organisations interested in supplying its products (Harland 1996; Narayandas, 2004). As per the supply chain management literature, relationships in industrial networks evolve, get into a structure and become established over a period of time (Gunasekaran and Ngai, 2005). The objective of such relationships is to form long-term associations between brand and customer firms based on a mutual confidence of both in the other organization (Harland, 1996; Harrison, 2004). Relationships with business customers help brands to timely learn about consumer issues and problems faced by customer firms in selling their products and innovatively provide just-in-time solutions and retain both consumers and customers with the brand (Tewari, 2006). Academic literature identifies just in time oriented actions of the brand as enabler actions. Researchers explain these actions as techniques that bring stability in business processes of brands (Fournier, 1998). Relationships between brands and business customers drive business customers to provide market information, consumer knowledge and sales experiences to brands in a real-time setting. Brands should use such knowledge constructively for planning future business (Amit and Zott, 2001). This aspect of time highlights its linkage with the processes analysis of a business as a collective effort of both the supplier and the customer firm aimed towards mutual achievement of objectives that are beneficial to two independent firms (Day, 1994; Rich and Hines, 1997). To understand the impact of customer relationships on adoption of just-in-time approach by brands in industrial networks following question will be answered by this research:

- What is the impact of brand relationships on the ability of brand to adopt just-in-time approach in industrial networks and influence preferences of its business customers?

Role of Business Processes in Brand Relationships

Research on organizational behavior considers efficiency of business processes as a practice that supports its decision making ability (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Amason, 1996). The efficiency of business processes of an organization depends upon its internal capabilities and external market environment (Teece *et al*., 1997). The business processes as per literature is a strategic decisions of actions taken by firms for achieving their long-term objectives (Gunasekaran and Ngai, 2004). To address external market environmental requirements brands use those industrial relationships that can smoothen the mobilization of its business processes for mutual benefits (Cunningham and Tynan, 1993; Halinen *et al*., 1999). Mutual benefits of relationships enable both brands and customer firms to restructure and establish processes as per the requirements of the environment of the industrial network in which brand operates (Weitz and Jap, 1995; Moller and Halinen, 2000). As the environment in industrial networks is prone to changing very fast and does not provide certainty to the actors performing in it, the behavior of the brand can be considered to be either rational or irrational by the customer firms based on their functional requirements (Anderson and Boocock, 2002). Individual wants of customer firms make environment of industrial networks very complex for brands. Under such circumstances, relationships enable brands to understand specific requirements of individual customers and simplify their business processes so that transactions can happen smoothly (Schellhase *et al.,* 2000; Gupta et al., 2010a). This aspect about role of relationship marketing approach adopted by brands for managing efficiency of their business processes in industrial networks will be studied in the form of following research question:

- What is the impact of brand relationships on the ability of brand to efficiently manage its business processes in industrial networks and influences preferences of its business customers?

Research Context:

Brands operating on global platforms are served by small and medium sized firms who act as its agents while they take up different roles in the supply chain process of the brand. These agents represent brand to various channels of sales and to ultimately make its products available to consumers. Entry of strong brands from developed markets into emerging markets has made highly potential but new consumer markets very competitive in nature. High level of competition has not only reduced the profit margins of local firms but also made them very conscious about the opportunities available to them to sell. As a result while these firms act as customer firms of brands and serve its consumers, the abundance of competitive products available to them to offer to consumers encourages them to drive away from a brand. Under such uncertain conditions brands cannot ensure availability of its products when there is a demand because of its inefficiency to timely make the product available due to missing links in its supply processes. In such circumstances international brands tend to miss the opportunity for their products to be sold when there is a demand. During such market conditions the relationships between brand and local firm can drive the local firm to approach the brand and gather information about the product from the brand and provide the information about the opportunity to the brand so that the brand managers can ensure availability of their products to the customer firms by closing the gaps in their business processes. Such a market scenario illustrates the role of time and process in enabling the brand to position itself as a company that is functionally and behaviourally equipped to capture the opportunities in a competitive market.

Research Approach

To test the concepts proposed by this research authors have used both existing knowledge available as secondary data and expert views as primary data. Qualitative data collected has helped the researchers to find inductive logics and make generalized conclusions based upon specific observations. Grounding of concepts into existing theory was important for understanding how managers perceive the role of relationship marketing in managing time and process while operating through industrial networks. The qualitative data collected was analysed thematically for answering the research questions raised after a review of literature. The themes were initially identified from the literature and were used as a reference guide during data collection process. Primary data was collected through personal interviews with decision makers working in the customer firms who represent international IT brands and face fierce competition from other customer firms who can also serve those set of consumers. The ability of the customer firm to understand the complexity of the products being offered by technology brands such as HP, Lenovo, Toshiba or Acer depends upon the product knowledge received by them from the brand and used by them to generate confidence of the consumer in the product. Since, all these brands try to provide similar type of knowledge about their product customer firms tend to sell the product available immediately and obtainable easily. The time taken to procure the product to sell and the ease of going through the process of obtaining the product influences the brand preferences of industrial customer firms. Given these characteristics of the industry, business customers of technology brands representing the brand in remote territories served as a sample population that could have provided answers to the research questions identified in the previous section. As a first step, drawing upon the IT products being offered in the open market of India eight companies who were selling branded products to consumers were identified as probable respondents. A series of in-depth interviews with these firms were conducted. Each of these interviews lasted between 40 to 65 minutes. The information received during these interviews allowed a deeper understanding of the influence of their relationship with the brand and on the ability of the brand to adopt just-in-time approach and efficiently manage its business processes. All the interviews were recorded and summarized independently. The thematic analysis served as the basis for answering the questions being raised by this study (Table 1). The respondent companies were selected based upon the information provided by them about their relationships with international brands on their website. Although, the findings cannot be generalized as they donot represent the practices of all types of local firms representing international brands in the IT industry, however, the firms chosen represent the top IT brands in Indian IT market.

Discussion

Establishment of a business relationship with customers in industrial network involves a supplier firm and a buyer firm. IT industry in India is dominated by international brands as they are the suppliers of products and buyer firms are local firms who buy their products and make them available to consumers. A large number of local small and medium sized firms operate in the IT sector that business buyers of international brands and their peculiar characteristic is that they donot deal with one brand i.e. their international alliances are not restricted to one brand. The selection of international brand with which a local buyer firm would like to alias is made by the buyer firm and their selections are based upon the ability of the international brand to help the local firm achieve its rational objective of making higher profits while keeping them behaviourally satisfied. The selection of brand while purchases are made by the decision makers of buyer firms is dependent not only on rational but also on brand's operational orientation as a combination of its functional and behavioural orientation. The uniqueness demonstrated by the brand using these two types of orientation makes it different from competitors whose products are also available to local buyer firms and their availability and knowledge of product influences their preferences. Almost 38% of the respondents in our qualitative sample gave preference to the functional orientation based on 'just-in-time' approach adopted by the brand to make its products available when these business customer firms come up with a demand, while 32% prioritize the brand they would like to sell based on the behavioural orientation i.e. 'efficient business process' approach. Rest of the 30% respondents considered both the types of orientations very important and used them as benchmarks to make selection for making purchases. These respondents were asked if they considered that there was a role of brand relationships in enabling the brand to adopt these two orientations for shaping their preferences and 76% revealed that their relationship with the brand played a significant role in ensuring that these two orientations donot become hurdles in the purchase decisions made by them. These differences also reveal how decision makers perceive these two types of oreintations as important individual aspects while making a selection of the brand to sell.

The main objective of a brand trying to establish its relationships with such buyer firms as its business customers is to capture the sales opportunities available through such networks. These networks provide an easy access to a large sized consumer segments. Consumer segment considers these business customer firms as representatives of brands. They also get influenced by the availability of the product available to them through these representative firms. Once a product of the brand has been sold to the consumer through industrial customer, the post-sales management of consumers issues or complaints are dealt by brands directly. Such business processes of brands help consumers in developing a faith in the brand and enable business customers to understand that the anticipation of brand from relationship is limited to sale of the product. The application of these concepts encourages business customers to offer their firm's resources for increasing sales of brand's products while favourably developing preferences of business customers towards the brand. Such a limited requirement of brands from business relationships allows business customers to concentrate on sales and fulfill rational objectives of their own organization and also help brand to achieve its objectives.

Use of Relationships for adopting time based approach

A relationship of mutually beneficial exchange constitutes the foundation of brand's relationship with industrial customers. As reflected by the respondents, manifestations of mutual benefits comprises not only of financial but also behavioural practices of both the firms partnering in a business relationship. Brand's business relationships with business customers have the ability to improve availability of their products in competitive markets. These relationships enable brands to procure and stock right amount of products so that business customers do not move away to competitor due to non-availability of brand's products to be supplied to consumers. Ability of business customers to receive supplies from the brand when they have a customer who is ready to purchase the product influences their operational and financial efficiency. This indicates use of a pull strategy followed by the brand that increases the efficiency of business customer firm, reduces the waiting time of the consumer and improves business investments that business customer firm makes in selling the brand. This approach is seen by respondents to be similar to conventional just-in-time strategy based on the philosophy of minimization of investments by lowering the inventories required. Respondents also reflected upon their understanding of a positive link between time based approach adopted by brands and the perception of business customers about the flexibility of the brand to serve the dynamic needs of business customers in industrial networks.

Use of Relationships in strengthening Business Processes

The rationality of brand's relationships with business customers was also examined from the perspective of efficiency of business processes. Respondents were requested to comment upon this manifestation because of its criticality in ensuring smooth exchanges of brand with business customers and driving brand preferences of these customers. It was indicated by respondents that in many cases, business processes contribute to the brand as a reverse direction relationship marketing strategy. While the responsibilities of different departments in a professional organization are identified and clearly defined, the efficiency of business processes followed by the brand to serve its customers demonstrates the primary focus of the brand. Notification of behavioural value contributed by brand to customer relationships also drives business customers to act as a business process strengthening agent that enables the brand to successfully address consumers satisfactorily at different levels of their means end chain. Observations of business customers about business processes followed by the brand were expressed as an influence upon perceptions of customers about the quality of products offered by the brand.

Conclusion:

Our paper's main purpose was to explore how brand relationships can influence time and process based approach adopted by brands in an industrial network setting where two types of firms i.e. brand owner firm and business customer firm are mutually dependent upon each other for their business. Based on the qualitative insights from industrial networks of international information technology brands in India, three important features of business should be kept under control to reflect upon the flexibility and efficiency of the firm. First, it is evident that brands should identify a relationship landscape in their industrial network to successfully adopt a time and business process based approach for efficiently managing its products. Second, it was observed that business customers appreciate the personal involvement of marketing team of brand in flexible manner for addressing their time and business process based issues and fulfilling their requirements. Incase there is a lag between two firms on account of coordination, brand relationship enables both the firms to pick upon the loose ends of the means end chain and tie a strong knot for a long term relationship. Thirdly this research provides a framework to unfold the role of two important variables time and business process between three types of actors in industrial networks i.e. firms owning brands and its business customer firms for e.g. its retailers and its consumers. Authors propose use of this framework to help brands to create distinctiveness for themselves in competitive markets and influence preferences of business customers. The three features identified call for further research on the topic. An interesting avenue for further research on this topic will be to penetrate deeper into the probabilistic nature of just-in-time approach and its influence on the manufacturing processes of the brand for optimized use of firm's resources. Such a research can be conducted on a set of companies involved in purchasing large volumes of products of international brands. This research will be very useful for practitioners in business markets wherein the market size is not very large but volumes sold through these business markets is quite high. For further research this paper identifies a path to be followed by marketers to benefit from reputation and an identity of the company built in the eyes of its stakeholders that differentiates it from its competitors in the marketplace. In this sense, the differences in configuration of time and business process based approach could make one specific strategy that is more central to the interest of international or local small and medium sized firms.

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Table 1: Use of Relationships for adopting time based approach **Table 1: Use of Relationships for adopting time based approach**

Manifestation of Respondents about use of Relationships	Manifestation of Respondent about adoption of time based approach	Manifestation of Respondent about efficiency of business processes
Mutual benefits	Availability of product for ensuring sale for financial returns	Ability of brand to forecast its future sales and control manufacturing process
Customer retention	By ensuring a smooth supply of products	Smoothness of business processes for ease of dealing with the brand
Demand fulfillment	Supply of product when required by business customer	Creates pull and acts as a back entry strategy against competitors
Financial returns	Reduces inventory related investments of business customers	Increases demand of products by business customers that improves sale of products to consumers
Business Customer perceptions	Ability of brand to serve customers in competitive industrial networks	Improved perceptions about quality of products based on organizational efficiency

Theoretical Framework: