

# THE ROLES OF RELATIONSHIP ACTORS IN VALUE CREATION IN THE AUTOMOTIVE WHOLESALE NETWORK

*Work-In-Progress*

**Ralf Berckhan<sup>1</sup>, Łukasz Malys<sup>2</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup> Department of International Marketing  
Poznań University of Economics*

*<sup>2</sup> Department of International Marketing  
Poznań University of Economics  
Lukasz.Malys@ue.poznan.pl*

## **Abstract**

The paper presents research framework for analyzing roles of various relationship actors in creating value from an automotive wholesaler perspective. It is suggested that the wholesaler should manage the portfolio of its relationships by distinguishing key entities in its environment and build desired relationships with them in order to achieve specified goals. The relationships can be classified according to certain criteria based on Key Performance Indicators (KPI) used in the industry.

Detailed characteristic of automobile wholesale sector is included in the paper. The characteristic covers automobile wholesalers setting in the automobile industry, presentation of direct and indirect network ties of the automobile wholesalers, discussion about characteristics and role of automobile dealer.

The paper ends with methodology for planned empirical study.

Keywords: relationship value, business networks, relationship actors, relationship entities, relationship portfolio management, automotive industry.

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing role of interdependence and close cooperation of business entities is characteristic of recent decades [see Dunning 1995; Axinn and Matthyssens 2001]. Cooperation of legally independent firms allows them to access each other resources (including knowledge and skills), performed activities and allows better competition in the market [Håkansson and Johanson 1992]. Traditionally, the value of the exchange was considered from the point of view of the benefits and costs associated with the product, but today it is pointed out that the development and maintenance of business relationships can also bring value for companies [Corsaro and Snehota, 2010].

Of all the groups of actors with which companies may cooperate, the most attention has been paid to those entities constituting links in the supply chain [see Håkansson, Johanson, Wootz 1976, p. 319-332; Ford 1984, p. 101-113; Gadde, Snehota 2000, p. 305-316; Hollensen, 2003, p. 197-254; Golicic 2007, p. 719-739; Barry, Dion, Johnson 2008, p. 114-135]. This is also visible in case of automotive industry research where a lot of attention has been paid to the “classical” relationship which is the link between supplier and buyer seen from the perspective of the sourcing and production process [Dyer 1997; Dyer and Chu 2003]. However the business relations in the succeeding sales and distribution channel are of equal importance, as not only the cost of sales and distribution are often higher than the original manufacturing costs but also business relations are becoming more complex when it comes to sales and marketing. Therefore the paper is focused on the relationships in the automobile wholesale network and look at relevant business relations that are responsible for creating value in the sales and marketing channel.

The aim of the paper is to present the concept of relationship portfolio management from the focal company perspective in the automotive wholesale network. The expected result of the portfolio management is creation of business network which brings the most value for the wholesaler.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of the relationship value was built on the basis of social exchange theory [see Homans 1958, Thibaut and Kelley 1959, Emerson 1962, Blau 1964] and later borrowed by researchers dealing with business relationships [e.g. Wilson and Jantrania, 1994, Eggert and Ulaga, 2001, Wilson, 2003; Corsaro and Snehota, 2010]. According to the assumptions of the theory, actors engage in exchange interactions, which result in the achievement of economic and/or social benefits. Assessment of benefits depends on the actor and the specific situation in which the exchange takes place. Some actors are more likely to value the economic benefits and other social benefits. Similarly, some situations may require an increase in economic benefits and other social. Other authors points to the existence of relationship value attributes that can be measured (hard attributes) and the ones that are more difficult to quantify (soft attributes) [Wilson and Jantrania, 1994] or tangible and intangible benefits [Blois 2001; Baxter and Matear 2004].

The benefits that actors derive from the exchange relationships are compared to the costs that must be borne to maintain the relationship. If the benefits outweigh the costs, the relationship yields positive results (brings value). This assumption is presented in the form of value "equations" in which perceived value (V) is represented as the difference between the perceived benefits (B) and the perceived costs (C) [Day 1999, Blois 2001]:  $V = B - C$ . The equation elements highlight the notion that relationship value is subjectively perceived construct [Ulaga and Eggert 2001].

In addition, the benefits and costs are compared to alternative sources of exchange in order to determine the dependence on the relationship [Lambe, Wittmann, and Spekman 2001]. It means the value of the relationship is relative to the value of alternative links.

The social exchange theory introduces the time factor to the exchange. Entities which participated in the exchange, based on experience, predict future outcomes of exchange (future benefits and costs). If in the past the exchanges have lead to positive results, actors are expecting positive results in the future [Homans, 1958; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959].

In the business relationships context, the relationship value is usually analysed from the perspective of customer, supplier or both [Corsaro and Snehota 2010]. That means the analysis is focused on the value the customer can get from the relationship with particular supplier, perception of value by customer or supplier, value of customer relationships for supplier (broadly discussed in the relationship marketing literature) etc. However, it is not common to measure the value a company can get from the whole spectrum of relationship it has with the various entities in the environment.

The extant relations portfolio concepts, both in theory and business practice, are focused either on customer or supplier portfolio management. The corresponding portfolio management models are aimed at categorizing relationships with customers or suppliers using specified criteria such as technical interaction and sales volume [Cunningham and Homse 1982], strategic importance of partner and difficulty in managing relationship [Fioca 1982], customer life cycle [Campbell and Cunningham 1983], cost-profit ratio [Dickson 1983], customer profitability [Shapiro et al. 1987], cost to serve, net price and relationship value [Turnbull and Zolkiewski 1997], loyalty, sales volume and profit [Fonfara 2004] etc. The rationale behind portfolio management is the optimisation of the allocation of company's limited resources and adjustment of company's action towards different groups of customers and suppliers [Turnbull 1990]. More specifically it addresses the issues of the necessity of new relationship creation and development, preservation and dissolution of existing ones [Turnbull and Zolkiewski 2002].

The relationship portfolio analysis has been focused either on customers or suppliers management. However, the relationship marketing literature also highlights the existence of other entities in the environment of the company that may have crucial impact on its performance. Comprehensive analysis of the company's business relationships requires the inclusion of other types of entities in the business network.

In the literature, there are a variety of concepts that can be helpful in distinguishing the types of entities (actors) in the business network of the company: the concept of seven markets, the idea taking into account existence of vertical and horizontal links etc. [see Table 1]. It should be noted that these schemes do not constitute opposing theory, and in many respects coincide.

**Table 1. Relationship Entities Classifications.**

<b>Business Entities Classification</b>	<b>Specified Entities</b>
Seven Markets Approach [Fonfara 2004]	Entities Classified According to the Markets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purchasers Market,</li> <li>• Suppliers Market,</li> <li>• Influence Market,</li> <li>• Referral Market,</li> <li>• Competitors Market,</li> <li>• Recruitment Market,</li> <li>• Internal Market.</li> </ul>

Vertical and Horizontal Links [Wilkinson 2008; Sousa 2010]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Vertical Links (business relationships or transactional relationships) with entities creating value chain.</li> <li>2. Horizontal Links (interorganisational relations) with other entities.</li> </ol>
Morgan and Hunt [1994] Classification	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Buyer Partnerships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediate Customers,</li> <li>• Ultimate Customers.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Supplier Partnerships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goods Suppliers,</li> <li>• Services Suppliers.</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Lateral Partnerships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competitors,</li> <li>• Non-profit Organisations,</li> <li>• Government.</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Internal Partnerships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Units,</li> <li>• Functional Departments,</li> <li>• Employees.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

The relationships with all of the above mentioned entities can bring value for a company. However, the value may significantly differ depending on the actor. The possible value of the relationship and thus the necessity to develop close relationships with specified entities is dependent on specific company and industry circumstances. It is crucial to determine the possible benefits a company can get from developing relationships with various types of actors, as well as cost associated to it. Business relationships portfolio management can therefore take into account identification of the main types of business entities in the environment, determining the importance of different types of entities for the performance of the company and selection of actors with whom companies should developed close ties. This kind of approach is wider compared to the discussed in the literature and is beyond the analysis of the relationship developed exclusively with actors belonging to certain types (customers or suppliers).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual perspective of the paper differs from most of the papers on relationship portfolio management and relationship value in three aspects: perspective of relationship values analysis, relationships spectrum of portfolio analysis and measurement of the relationship value.

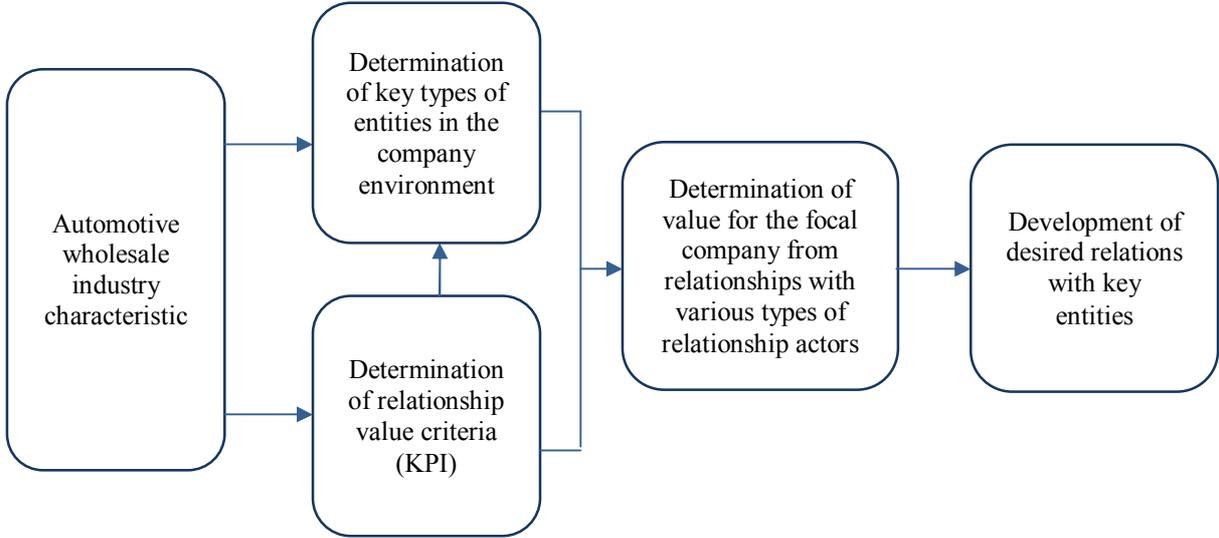
The perspective of analysis in the paper is focal company in business network. It is not defined as customer nor supplier. The paper will explore how the relationships with various types of actors can bring value for the focal company. The automotive industry was chosen as an example to present an empirical context of the discussed issues. The industry is characterised by large number and types of actors involved as well as high importance of cooperation. However, the presented analysis could be applied for any other industry.

Usually relationship portfolio management starts with classification of customers or suppliers according to certain criteria. In case of the paper the classification will be carried out for the whole spectrum of relationships developed with different types of entities. The only

criteria of the classification will be the possible value the focal company may gain from developing relationships with different types of entities.

The question of how to measure relationship value is very important is frequently asked in the literature [Uлага and Eggert 2001; Corsaro and Snehota 2010]. As mentioned above value is commonly defined as the difference between benefits and cost of relationships. In our case the benefits will be measured by the ability of different types of entities to influence company performance measured by Key Performance Indicators (KPI). The cost will be only implicitly addressed. It is acknowledged that development of close relationships costs time and effort. For that reason only the most influential (for KPIs) types of entities should be the subject of company’s attempts.

The conceptual framework of the paper is presented on figure 1.



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework.**

The starting point of the analysis will be the description of an automotive wholesale industry with the wholesaler’s functions and responsibilities, important entities in its environment and analysis, characteristic and responsibilities of dealers. The Key Performance Indicators used in the industry to measure the performance of the companies will serve as guidance in distinguishing the most important types of actors in the automotive wholesaler networks, i.e. the types of entities with the highest possible impact on company’ performance. The following step will be focused on determination which KPIs and by what actions may be most influenced by specified entities. The expected result of the analysis is description of the relationship portfolio that brings the most value to the automobile wholesaler company.

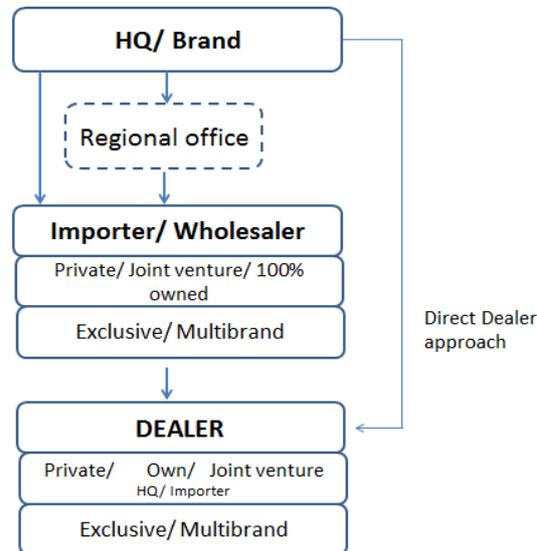
**AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY CHARACTERISTIC**

The automotive sales channel can be, in general, described through the following steps (see figure 2):

1. Manufacturer level with its corresponding headquarters functions,

2. Importer/wholesaler (sometimes also called “distributor”) level<sup>1</sup>,
3. Dealer level.

In some cases, such as Lamborghini or Bentley, headquarters works without any regional office/importer/distributor or wholesale level. They work, due to their niche, low volume character, with so-called “Direct Dealers”<sup>2</sup>.



**Figure 2. Structure of distribution and sales channel in the automobile industry.**

The importer (in the following called wholesaler) is normally nominated within an international operating company, selling its products and services outside of the borders of its home country. This is the case especially if companies with high complex products (such as the automobile industry) decide to go abroad/overseas. However also within economically and geographically tied countries such as European Union every state/country has a wholesaler nominated (exceptions are Andorra, Monaco where the size and the ethnic closeness to other bigger countries do not justify a separate wholesale level).

The wholesaler ownership can generally be described through 3 different possibilities: fully owned by the headquarter, joint venture (with a local company out of the same country where the goods are planned to be sold) or fully independent/private. The structure of the ownership depends on several circumstances, such as the companies behaviour in the internationalisation process [see Fonfara 2012], but also on the political and or economic framework. For example it was not possible in the former socialist/communist countries to establish own “capitalistic” oriented wholesalers. A local company (in most cases state owned) had to be chosen as a partner. This is still the case in China, where the wholesale level is following a joint venture structure.

Independent of the ownership or the country of operation, a wholesaler always has the following functions and responsibilities:

1. Build up the retailer/dealer network.

<sup>1</sup> In some cases regional office – for example Porsche works with such a structure.

<sup>2</sup> There are further specific cases, such as Toyota in the US. Toyota worked with 10 different Distributors when they entered the US market in 1958, 6 of them private Distributors, 4 Company owned. Between 1973 and 1990 Toyota bought 4 of them back, keeping still 2 of them as private Distributors (Southeast and Gulf States).

2. Implement the manufacturers price, product, marketing and service strategy.
3. Take care of customer and dealer satisfaction.
4. Keep the contact with local government and authorities and represent the manufacturer/headquarter in the country.
5. Ensure that local laws and regulations (e.g. tax and homologation requirements) are fulfilled.
6. Manage the wholesale company in line with headquarter “philosophy”.
7. Ensure target achievement (such as sales volume, market share, profitability and customer/dealer/employee satisfaction) as agreed with the headquarter.
8. Develop local management and talents.
9. Retro-aliment the headquarter with local market, product, customer and legal requirements.
10. Ensure logistics of products and spare parts deliveries in time, required quantity and quality.

The wholesaler is always formally tied to the manufacturer through an official Importer Contract (legal tie). However, in the automobile industry a wholesaler is connected to a whole set of other market players. The wholesaler never acts in isolation and his relationships and links develop over time as a result of his economic activities, thus creating business networks with other entities that are connected with each other. Due to the wholesaler characteristics (as described above) it is obvious, that the wholesaler mainly acts in a B2B environment, where the relation to the headquarters on one hand and the relationship to the dealers on the other are the most important direct network ties where mutual orientation and commitment are strongly developed.

However, there are also other market players and actors that influence the wholesaler’s behaviour and efficiency (see figure 3):



**Figure 3. Direct network links of a wholesaler.**

Dealers play the most important role within the sales and distribution channel, which in the automobile industry is often described as “Checkpoint 8 to Customer (CP 8)” – the moment when the car officially leaves production and is handed over to the sales and marketing division of the manufacturer. The dealers are normally responsible for nearly 100% of the sales volume in a given country, with the exception of strategic key accounts – but even within this process, dealers still have the logistic and after sales responsibilities.

Dealers, especially in Europe, can have different owner structures resulting in different sizes. These are:

1. Independent family business partners (rather small dealerships with one or small number of brands)
2. Independent Dealer Groups (medium to large dealer business, mostly with several brands in their portfolio<sup>3</sup>)
3. Dealerships owned by the headquarters (generally operated in strategic locations or big cities; they can either be owned and run by the headquarters or owned by the headquarters and managed by an independent third party).

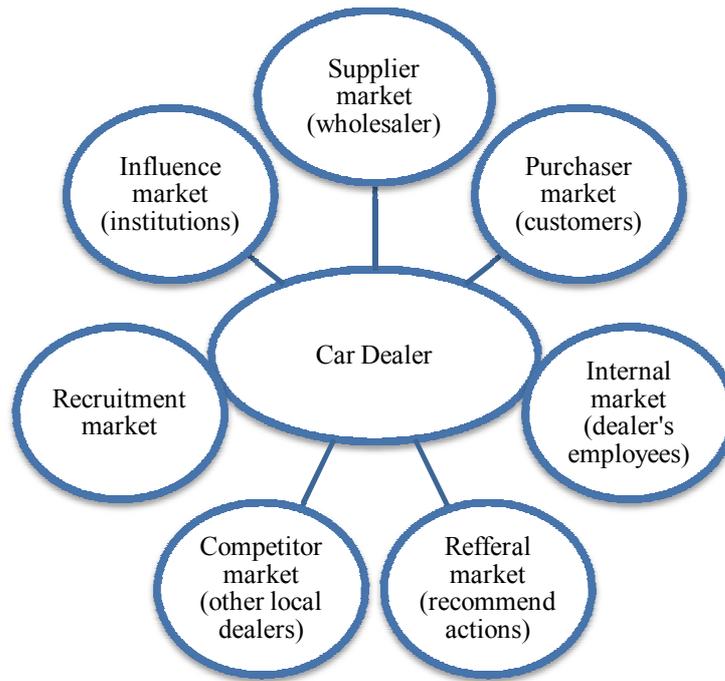
Some of the dealer’s responsibilities include:

1. Building the dealership and fulfilling the standards set by the wholesaler (e.g. corporate identity and design standards (CI/CD), sales and after-sales processes and training).
2. Generating traffic in the showroom and covering his area of responsibility (as far as applicable).
3. Selling cars, parts and accessories to the final customer and taking care of the after sales process (warranty, repair and service during the ownership period).
4. Creating unique “Customer Experience”.
5. Ensuring customer satisfaction in sales as well as after sales.
6. Keeping customers loyal to the brand.
7. Representing the brand in front of the final customer.
8. Providing feedback to the wholesaler about (local/regional) market developments and competitors’ activities.

The dealer is legally tied to the wholesaler (or, in case of smaller niche brands, to the headquarters, as described above) through a contract, and represents the important “threshold” to the final customer, thus working in two areas: B2B on one hand and B2C on the other. To fulfil the above-mentioned responsibilities, the dealer is embedded in a complex local and regional network of business and customer relationships. In order to describe the network ties of the dealer the “seven markets approach” may be used (see figure 4 taken from Fonfara 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Large Dealer Groups, such as Inchcape or Porsche-Inter-Austria, can be bigger than the wholesaler.



**Figure 4. Network ties of dealers based on the seven markets concept.**

Table 2 summarises crucial task that dealer should perform on each market.

**Table 2. Dealers’ tasks on the seven markets in the automotive industry.**

Market	Crucial tasks
Suppliers Market (ties to wholesaler and other suppliers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fulfilment of standards (wholesalers),</li> <li>• development of programmes of cooperation with other suppliers (marketing agencies etc.)</li> </ul>
Purchasers Market (customer ties)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identification and binding potential buyers,</li> <li>• development of programmes targeted at individual (private) and institutional (fleet) purchasers,</li> <li>• building customer loyalty of the brand and/or the dealer,</li> </ul>
Competitors Market (ties to other brands’ dealers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identification of fields of potential cooperation</li> </ul>
Referral Market (ties to VIPs, loyal customers, important local entities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• generating positive “word of mouth”</li> <li>• opening new business opportunities</li> </ul>
Influence Market (ties to entities that affect purchasing decisions and create opinions on a given market)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identification of the most influential entities on the local market,</li> <li>• development of a plan of action towards the most influential entities on the local market</li> </ul>
Recruitment Market (ties to potential new employees)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• attracting potential employees directly or through corresponding search firms</li> </ul>
Internal Market (ties to the existing employees)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development and training of sales and administration staff as well as mechanics and after-sales management</li> </ul>

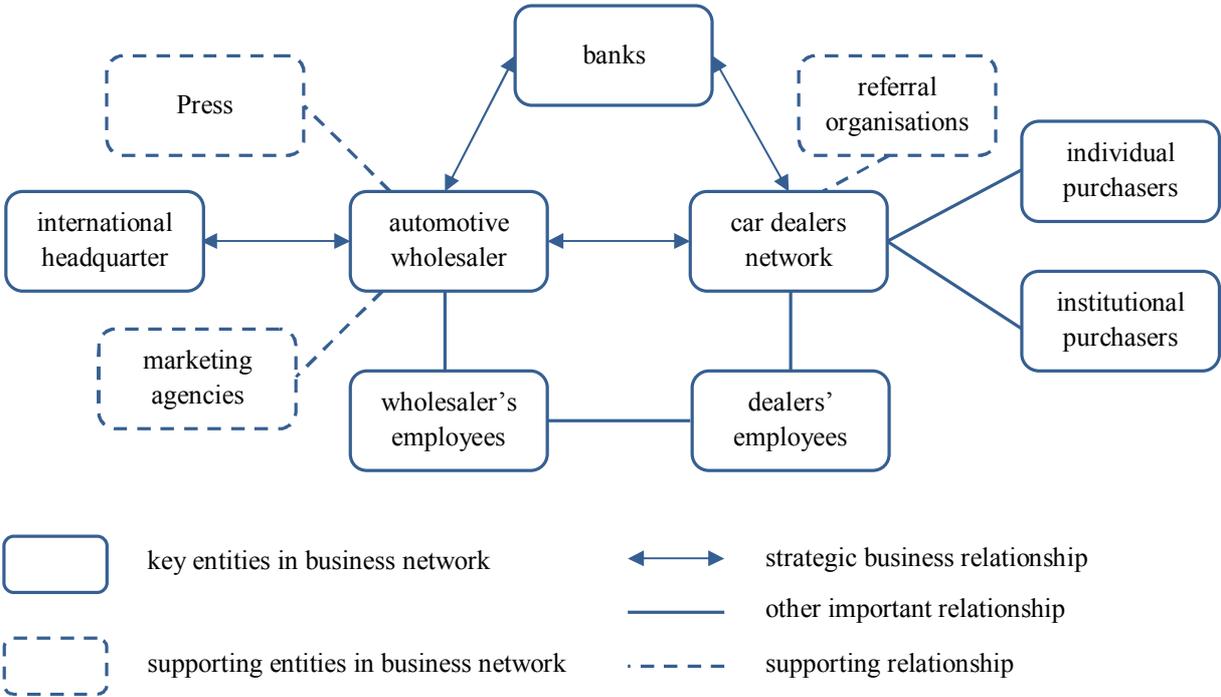
Unfortunately, not all dealers understand that it is important to carry out activities on all seven markets in order to be successful (thus affecting the overall performance of the wholesaler).

**METHODOLOGY**

The empirical study will be a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. In the first part the questionnaire was distributed in March 2013 among the CEOs, Managing Directors and Heads of Divisions of most of the automotive wholesalers operating on Polish market (in particular Skoda, Audi, Volkswagen, Porsche, Opel, Ford, Toyota, KIA, Renault, SEAT). The questionnaire included questions on the importance of the entities specified in the automotive wholesale network for the performance of the wholesaler. The relationship actors stipulated in the questionnaire was the one directly linked to the wholesaler and indirectly, via. dealers’ bonds. The research also covered the importance of different KPIs in assessing company performance.

The qualitative research will be done in focus group discussions on how different relationships actors (types of entities) can bring value for the company and which KPIs may be influenced by their actions. It is planned to carry out two focus group discussions: one with Heads of Divisions of chosen wholesalers and the second with selected dealers.

As the presented paper is work-in-progress only the initial results are available, but they allow to present an automotive sales network picture (see figure 5).



**Figure 5. The business network of an automotive wholesalers (sales perspective).**

There are three types of relationships in the automotive sales network: strategic business relationship, other important relationships and supporting relationships. The first two are believed to be most valuable for the automotive wholesaler. However the complete understanding of the value creation and relationship portfolio management requires further analysis and focus group discussion.

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