

Strategic customers' network and value co-creation

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper

Although the Service Dominant Logic (SDL) paradigm brings some interesting development in the conceptualisation of “value co-creation”, and despite strategic account management (SAM) receiving some higher level of interest from academia, there seems to be a gap in the academic literature to study the role played by value co-creation in SAM.

Hence, our research tries to answer the question: how is value “co-created” within a strategic customer network?

Literature addressed

We look at the concept of value co-creation within the SDL paradigm and try to link it to the concept of network (supplier and strategic customer networks), based on research from the IMP group.

Methodology

We develop the theory, using case study research: our study is based on the study of supplying companies, which have recently reviewed their marketing strategy to focus on “value co-creation” with their strategic customer network.

Main contribution

Our findings help to better understand the interaction of the supplier and customer networks and how the SDL program of value co-creation translates into BtoB offering: the customer network is first used by the supplier to create some understanding of end users' behaviours and to act upon them as the supplier creates the “fit” with the strategic customer's or its end user's expectations by delivering an hybrid offering targeting at performance or supply chain integration and anchoring such an offering within the customer's business process.

We further define the concept of customer network value proposition as studied by Cova and Salle (2008)¹.

Keywords: SDL paradigm, BtoB, strategic customers,

¹ Cova, Bernard, and Robert Salle. 2008. “Marketing solutions in accordance with the S-D logic: Co-creating value with customer network actors.” *Industrial Marketing Management* 37(3):270–77.

Introduction

Some recent developments in Service Dominant Logic (SDL) have focussed on value co-creation and are highlighted by Grönroos and Voima (2013: 135): “although value creation is not explicitly defined, extant literature on SDL generally treats it as co-creation, in that it emphasizes a process that includes actions by both the service provider and customer”.

We find here a possible tipping point between the SDL paradigm and business market research on the supplier-customer interaction (Ford, 2002), which is highlighted by this recent stream of articles on “value co-creation” (Leroy et al., 2013; Hilton et al., 2012; Jaakola and Hakanen, 2012; Cova et al., 2011).

We also find a stream of academic articles on Strategic Account Management (SAM), which defines SAM programs as fostering on collaborative business relationships to provide mutual benefits to supplier/KA dyad (Henneberg et al., 2009) and relate such programs to superior value creation from supplier or customer perspective (Pardo et al., 2006; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Wengler et al., 2006; Gosselin and Bauwen, 2006; Richards and Jones, 2009; Ming-Huei and Wen-Chiung, 2011), hence, as stated by Henneberg et al. (2009:536): “Such relationship-induced value management is increasingly being seen as a dominant logic for marketing (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

Nevertheless Henneberg et al. (2009: 546) also recognise that most research on SAM and value creation remain dyadic and that “*a true network perspective needs to be adopted by putting the dyadic relationships into a systemic environment (Håkansson et al. 1999) which makes it possible to ascertain the necessary networking competences to manage the proposed value strategies within complex inter-organisational structures of exchange relationships (Ritter 1999).*”

Hence, the aim of this paper is to study how “value co-creation” in business-to-business vertical relationships is created. We focus on the supplier and strategic customer networks.

Thus, we try to bridge the gap between the SDL paradigm and the SAM academic literature to study how the concept of “value co-creation” also applies to the supplier/strategic customer network. Our research tries to answer the question: how is value “co-created” within a supplier/strategic customer network? By answering this question, we contribute to a better understanding of SAM, linking this construct to value co-creation and SDL.

First we will review the literature on SAM, value creation and value co-creation; second, we will define our research design and present our case studies, before discussing our results and highlighting the implications of our research in conclusion.

Literature review: SAM and value creation

Strategic customer management, or key account management, symbolizes the relational far end of the relationship-marketing continuum (Yip & Madsen, 1996) and is often described as the individualization of the business relationship to optimize the supplier-customer interaction and to integrate such customers into value creation (Ivens and Pardo, 2007).

Value creation is a key marketing concept that date back to the 1980s and is to be found in the 2013 American Marketing Association definition of marketing: “*Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for **creating**, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have **value** for customers, clients, partners, and society at large*”.

The concept was primarily built from a goods dominant logic (GDL) with a supplier centric perspective as firms (suppliers) embed value in goods, value is “added” by enhancing or increasing (product) attributes (Vargo et al., 2008), whereas customers are passive (Payne et al., 2008).

Anderson and Narus (2008) also define value in business markets as “*the worth in monetary terms of the economic, technical, service, and social benefits a customer firm receives in exchange for the price it pays for a market offering*”. Hence, value creation seems to be a core competence of the strategic customer manager (Storbacka, 2012; Rogers, 2012), but interestingly, most the academic literature stresses the need for the supplier to develop value creation capabilities without specifying in details what will be the “value creation” output for the strategic customer and how it will be delivered. Some scholars try to define a typology of such value, e.g. Pardo et al. (2006) define first exchange value (“*based upon the value originating in KAM activities by the supplier and being consumed by the customer.*”), second proprietary value (“*defined as being created and consumed (in the sense of being appropriated) only by the supplier*”) and third relational value (“*defined as being appropriated by both supplier and customer.*”).

Most academic literature on KAM refer largely to the first two types of value, exchange and proprietary value as they stress the fact that value is created by the supplier and we hardly know if and how it is “consumed” by the customer (Gosselin and Heene, 2003; Jones et al., 2005). As such value creation for the customer remains a fuzzy concept, Georges and Eggert (2003) stress the need for “*fit between their organization's value offer and customer's needs*” and “*extensive collaboration and interactions*”, whereas Ming-Huei and Wen-Chiung (2011) insist that supplier's unique resources must be dedicated to enhance the value proposition and Storbacka (2012) refers to “*coordination fit*”.

Some scholars recognize that some research still needs to be carried out as value creation in the context of SAM has not been yet properly explored (Pardo et al., 2006; Storbacka 2012)

Literature review: the concept of value co-creation and SDL.

With the development of the service dominant logic (SDL), another conceptualisation of value creation has been developed, “value co-creation”. The scope of value creation shifts from supplier-driven to a customer-driven process (Vargo et al., 2008), but it becomes mostly a joint and interactive process between supplier and (end) customer as both parties operate within each other's processes.

This co-creative paradigm (Kowalkovski et al., 2012) finds its foundation in SDL and in early marketing research (Grönroos, 2012), particularly in the “servuction” model from Eiglier and Langeard (1987) who stress that service is “co-produced” in direct firm (supplier)-customer interactions and what is prevailing is customer “experiences” (Prahalad, 2004)- Prahalad that goes as far as mentioning the “experience-centric co-creation view », meaning that value will be created by the customer depending on its level of engagement.

This notion of customer engagement is implicitly used by Giarini (1999/2000) who says that the SDL value co-creation model can be applied to physical products as the interaction will happen during different phases, during some co-production (product customization) and later on (during the “use” of the product). Macdonald et al. (2011) remind us that the customer always co-create value “in use”, whereas the supplier supports the customer's own usage process.

If we apply the SDL value co-creation model to this “diachronic” approach, splitting the production from the “use” of the product, we have to look at the network of actors involved in the different stages of this value co-creation model in a BtoB context.

The SDL paradigm implicitly recognise the value creation *network* (Lusch and Vargo, 2006) as defined by Norman and Ramirez (1994,5): “actors come together to co-produce value”. Cova and Salle (2008:272) show that to translate the program of SDL into BtoB offering, the supplier network must interact with the customer network, “thereby co-creating value with them and for them”.

From there, we can suggest that a co-creation value proposition in a SAM context will be the process by which supplying companies link the supplier and the customer network and propose a value co-creation framework. To understand in details this process of value co-creation in the context of SAM, i.e. the interaction between supplier and customer network, we have developed case study research.

Research design

Due to the lack of existing empirical work on which to position this research, it was decided to develop the theory using case study research, which is a prevailing method in BtoB marketing (Dubois and Araujo, 2004; Piekkari et al., 2010): “because of the richness of the picture produced by case research, the approach is suitable to handle the complexity of network links” (Easton, 1995). The focus is on in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and its context (Cavaye, 1996)

The case study research originated from the researcher's attendance as guest sponsor to practitioners' workshops gathering senior executives from marketing and sustainability departments from multinational companies in Paris (around 60 members) to think over how to better link sustainability and marketing strategy. Such workshops were held regularly from October 2010 until October 2011, when a round-up meeting was organised to present the outcome of the different sessions.

Hence, the first stage of the case study was made up from the researcher's personal reports from the meetings and secondary sources provided by the other attendants (mostly Powerpoint presentations, company websites dedicated to sustainable solutions, sustainability reports, surveys and meeting proceedings).

From there, the researcher organised during 2012 some face-to-face meetings with selected companies to further explore the linkage between their offering and sustainability. The goal was to deepen some case studies from the selected companies.

Companies have been selected in order to describe different situations and various industrial markets. Informants were senior executives involved in the marketing and SAM decision process within their company.

Hence, the data collection was based on informal interviews and secondary sources, which were followed by long interviews conducted on site and tape-recorded. All materials were gradually coded and analysed to gradually refine our analysis of the value co-creation process. “Systematic combining” as described by Dubois and Gadde (2002:554) could best describe the analysis process, as empirical data and theoretical constructs were intertwined and evolved simultaneously in the different stages of the process that lasted over 18 months – each workshop, each presentation brought new materials to be analysed, but also put in perspective of the previous data analysis.

The use of those multiple research methods across multiple time periods are defined by Woodside and Wilson (2003: 498) as “triangulation”, to provide rigorous evidence for hypothesis generation and exploration of areas where existing knowledge is scarce (Cavaye, 1996).

Case studies (Table 1)

<i>Company 1</i>	<i>Number of employees</i>	<i>Sales turnover</i>	<i>Sustainability initiatives</i>
This company is a major player in energy management	13 750	3 800 M€	They moved from providing and managing energy infrastructures to working closely with their customers

for local government authorities and businesses			and committing to energy consumption, optimization and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. They now commit to results in terms of energy use, cost, and the environment through long-term contracts, such as Energy Performance Contracts (EPCs) that include actions designed to raise awareness of energy consumption among end users.
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<i>Company 2</i>	<i>Number of employees</i>	<i>Sales turnover</i>	<i>Sustainability initiatives</i>
This company is a major corrugated packaging supplier	20 000	3 669 M£	During the past decade this company moved towards a better optimization of their customers' supply chain, thereby increasing the value of their products/services by reducing the amount of packaging material as well as associated lower freight costs and carbon emissions. In order to move closer to an integrated supply chain (from supplier to end-consumer), in 2009 they created their first "Impact and Innovation" center, a mock-up of a supermarket and back-of-store environment where packaging specifiers and buyers can spend time developing how best to use corrugated packaging to sell more products.

Table 1: presentation of case studies

Main findings

Company 1 is an industrial enterprise that sells services under the form of energy management. So far, most of their contacts were direct customers (e.g., local government authorities or businesses to whom they sell "warmth"). However, the company was aware that end consumers would pay the bills (e.g., council flat tenants) and thus decided to focus some of their actions toward those people to help them decrease their heating consumption. The following is a quote from one of our informants:

Our core competence is to have a well-adapted, balanced and optimized heating system, but we also have an interest into end consumers behaving in a "virtuous" way, as we have contracts in which we commit ourselves for a certain level of energy performance at a given cost. We have even a few contracts in which we share with our direct customer potential savings (final cost below the forecasted level) and for us, we find here a way to create more

value with our customers and to be in a win-win situation. (Company 1 Marketing Director)

In this case, value creation is based on new heating technologies (e.g., use of renewable energy), but also on a change of behaviors from end consumers to decrease energy consumption. By involving the strategic customer network with a financial incentive, the supplying company de-commoditize their products—meaning that they are no longer just a heating provider, but a heating manager all along the supply chain—and reinforces the span of services that they provide. The financial incentive benefits the direct customer, but is also transferred to the final consumer by lowering the heating bill. As quoted by our informant:

To change the end consumer behavior, in the case of collective heating, we inform them on actions they should take to lower their energy consumption: we distribute flyers; we post recommendations in the building entrance; [and] we organize information meetings. When individual meters are used, we install smart meters for tenants to be directly aware of their individual consumption. I believe this is the future in social housing, although the investment is high. We have about forty different types of actions, with today the possible use of the Internet to forward instant information on energy consumption. Our direct customers do appreciate this type of service and we carry out some research (with collaborative programs with universities) to check the impact of our actions towards the end consumer.

The company advises the direct customer to encourage this recommended behavior, as it often results in lower energy consumption from end consumers and a decrease of energy costs directly reflected in the customer's bills. This represents the starting point of the value co-creation process between the supplying company and the customer network: direct customer and end user both work to support the supplier to reach the expected level of performance as this translates directly in the final heating bill. The supplying company creates some kind of “value creation virtuous circle”, based on the fact the strategic customer has a great number of end users, whose “aggregated” change of behavior increases the impact of the final performance. We present this value co-creation process in Figure 1:

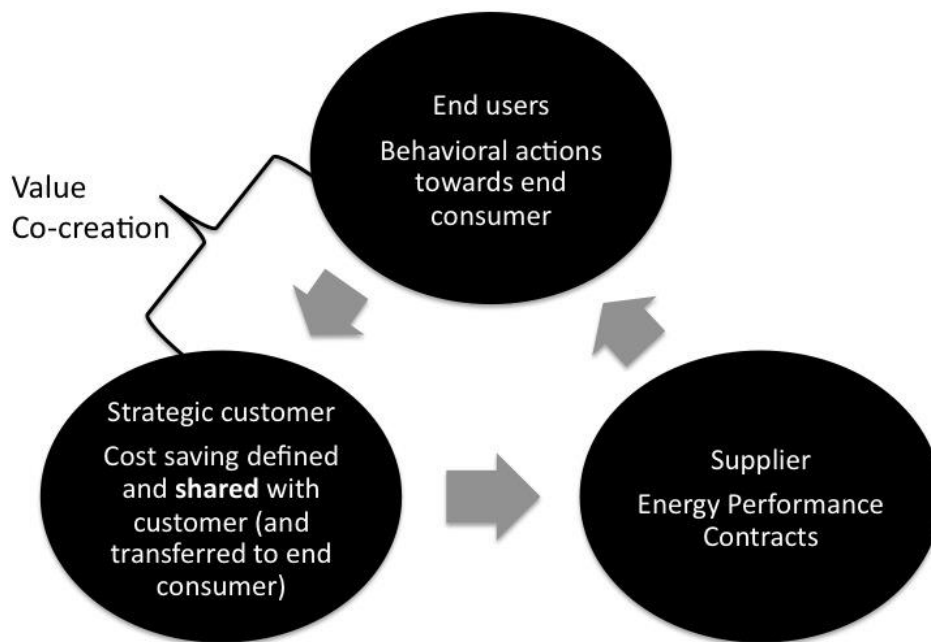


Figure 1: Sustainable value co-creation process – company 1

Company 2 is a world leader in corrugated packaging. In order to move away from manufacturing and selling a product, which is considered a quasi-commodity, they are working to combine and maximize:

(...) the influences of primary and secondary packaging within the retail environment. Our creative approach of optimizing impact and appearance, addressing ease of use and purchasing, reducing overall weight and cost, not to mention insight into future retail trends, puts us at the forefront of this consumer battleground. (Extract from their Internet site)

Their business model is both built “reducing overall weight and cost,” but they have also completely reviewed their selling process to integrate the complete supply chain down to the final consumer by “addressing ease of use and purchasing.” In that respect, they have created “Impact and Innovation Centers,” where:

Visitors are taken through how pallets can be most efficiently used to reduce the numbers of lorries on the roads; how merchandising units can be designed and optimized for both distribution and in-store; how printed Ready Retail Packaging makes it easier to identify products in the back-of-store area; and the recycling credentials of corrugated board. (“Corrugated giant eyes retail-ready boom,” published by Packaging News on 01/07/09)

The following is a quote by one of our informants:

We want to struggle on another field (than price) by bringing to our customers substantial savings – our business development goes through the integration of the primary and transport packaging.

This is, for instance, what we have been doing for a major confectionary brand. We have produced a single corrugated packaging with display features for retail. We have worked to strengthen the performance of the pack (to achieve higher pallet stacks), whilst working on improved visual appearance (for higher end consumer attraction). We managed to have 25% more product per pallet with a strong reduction of packaging materials. The final outcome was an environmental gain: fewer lorries on the road, i.e. less carbon emissions and less material to recycle. (Company 4 Communication Director)

This company combines two different strategies: first, a design strategy to reduce the environmental impact of their products, and second, they link this strategy to some deep insight into retailer or end consumer needs to integrate Business to Consumer (BtoC) marketing, as stated by the phrase “working on improved visual appearance.”

This integration of their customers' needs, as their strategic customers are mostly FMCG² companies, is carried out via their Impact and Innovation Centers, where a physical co-creation work does take place within a mock-up supermarket by reproducing and optimizing the unpacking, display, and point of sales configuration.

In short, this company works on the complete supply chain cycle that starts from the packaging manufacturing process until the selling of the packed customer's product; they link together a manufacturing process to a service process in the final stages, as they support their customers to achieve their own targets in a value co-creation process, which we present in Figure 2.

² Fast Moving Consumer Goods

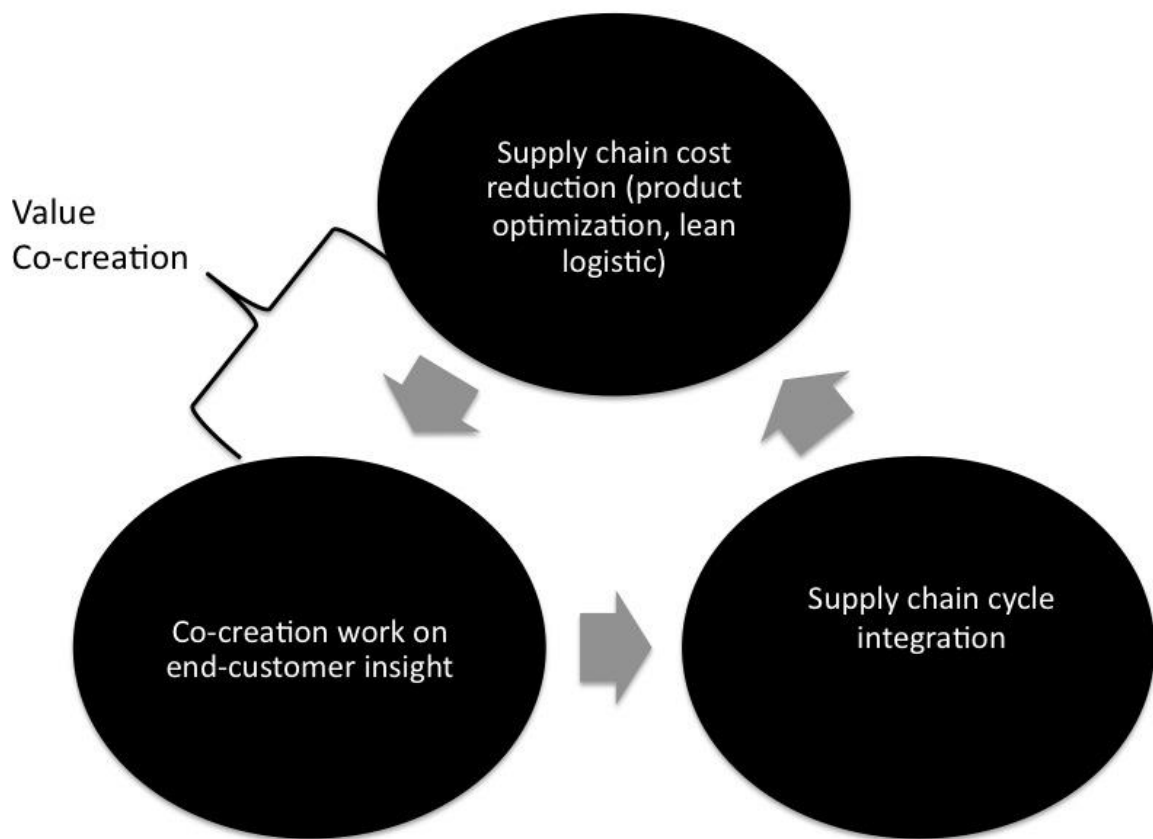


Figure 2: Sustainable value co-creation process – company21

Discussion

To summarize our findings, value co-creation is to be understood as a multistage approach. First, the BtoB selling process is embedded into a service approach, as supplying companies provide an additional service: if they are manufacturing companies, the service is bundled with a product under the form of a hybrid offering (Ulaga and Reinartz, 2011), or the service is extended for companies that originally operate as BtoB service/distribution companies.

For instance, company 2 gathered deep knowledge about the customer and the customer's customer (retailer), and in doing so was able to provide a hybrid offering with cost reductions along the entire supply chain, which subsequently became more efficient (e.g., product weight reduction, lean logistics, etc.).

Second, to provide their direct customer with this service, suppliers co-create value with their customer's customer or end user by getting a good behavior insight or even influencing their behavior. Hence, from a behavioral perspective, the end customer or user becomes the starting point of the service creation. Also, the service is performed in co-creation with the direct (strategic) customer who becomes involved in the production of this service (through supporting the change of behavior, through getting a better understanding of purchase behavior, through a cost reduction scheme, etc.)

We summarized these initial findings in Table 2.

1. Process used to understand/create customer or/and end-user sustainability awareness	Tool used	2. Type of service created with direct customer	Output
Communication	Leaflets/meetings with end users	Performance contract (energy cost reduction)	Stabilize/decrease customer's energy consumption
Customer/retailer/end consumer process analysis	Supply chain actors' needs analysis (software/mock up store)	Reducing costs along entire supply chain	Sustainable supply chain integration

Table 2: Sustainable value co-creation process.

Through the actions taken by the companies, we address the broader implications beyond the SDL paradigm of this new “servitization” trend (Lightfoot et al., 2013; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011), which leads manufacturers to combine products and services. Our selected companies, change their marketing strategy and offer (or reinforce) services, which can be analyzed at different levels.

If we refer to the type of service and output described in Table 2, we can classify the nature of sustainable value co-creation into two major categories:

1. *Focus on performance*: customers enjoy increased benefits via services that achieve cost reduction or that support increased sales efficiency (see Table 2).
2. *Focus on supply chain integration*: services integrate the complete supply chain to make it more efficient to all the customer network actors (see Table 2).

Value co-creation between supplier and customer leads to increased value being created at the end of the value chain (i.e. focus on the supplier's performance leading to increased benefits for the strategic customer) or to increased value created along the supply chain, and led by an integration of the value chain. Customers enjoy increased value co-creation thanks to support from their suppliers, which permit them to increase performance or to integrate their supply chain with cost-saving actions.

Hence, our findings improve our understanding of the interaction between the supplier and customer networks, and of how the SDL program of value co-creation translates into BtoB offerings (Cova and Salle (2008: 272). The customer network is first used to create awareness among end users or to understand customer behaviors. The supplier network subsequently creates the appropriate “fit” that addresses the expectations of customers or end users by delivering a service aiming at performance or increased supply chain integration.

Implications

Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective we demonstrate a BtoCtoB marketing approach. We show how the supplier and customer networks merge in a value co-creation virtuous circle (see Figures 1 & 2).

Furthermore, we show how value co-creation involves a service with a focus on final performance or supply chain integration (cost reduction). In BtoB, value co-creation is mostly connected to product improvement, and additionally to the improved use of a product and the functionality of the product.

Thus, our research enriches the SDL program by showing the role that value co-creation can play in reinforcing or extending the service proposition to the BtoB customer. Our findings also show how the value co-creation process link the supplier, the customer and the end user or retailer.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, our research should help industrial suppliers define a process by which they can create a hybrid or service offering. We show the role played by a very detailed understanding of the needs of end users and of their level of awareness. Leveraging this awareness is key to defining a new marketing strategy that focuses on the performance of the final offering for the end user.

Thus, our research invites industrial suppliers to move beyond the supply of their direct customers, into the complete customer network, and to include in their supply cycle some understanding and even some actions targeted at the final customer. Such actions, when required, are not marketing actions, as we are not truly in a multistage marketing approach (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2012), but they are related to final customer or user *behavior*. The supplier must either understand (possible need for end customer behavior research) or influence this behavior, but not for direct purchasing, as the purchaser remains the direct customer. For example, company 2 tries to influence energy consumer behavior, but this consumer does not interfere with the choice of the energy provider, which remains the sole decision of the direct (strategic) customer.

Our research shows that by improving the *fit* between the direct customer and the end customer, value creation is increased, as all parties co-create this incremental value. By providing services in terms of understanding or influencing end customer behavior, the supplier leverages this sustainable value creation.

Limitations and future research

As is the case for any research project, our limited selection of companies and qualitative research approaches create some limitations, some of which offer fruitful avenues for research. While our findings represent what appears to be a robust managerial reality, we are aware of its exploratory nature. More research must be conducted to address the extent to which the process we are analyzing is developed.

Our cases could provide an avenue for further research to study how companies build some intra-organizational learning from the value co-creation process that leads them to change their business model, deepening its service component.

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