# Customer versus provider perspective on industrial solution process

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**Abstract:** The business logic in the manufacturing industry has changed in the 21st century. In the current industrial market, manufacturers are driven to provide more comprehensive offerings that go beyond the traditional product-orientation by providing capacity and availability for their customers. From incidental merchandise, services have become the core of manufacturers' offerings with long-lasting service agreements over the life-cycles of their products.

This study continues the research work we have conducted within industrial solutions. Previously, we have done empirical research on how industrial solution providers see solution business. Our ongoing research is focusing on the other side of the solutions business, the customers' perceptions on solution business. This work-in-progress paper sheds light on the results from the provider side and also presents our research setting for the customer data collection.

# INTRODUCTION

Solution business logic differs greatly from product-based business logic – the change from transaction-based business towards deeper collaborative relationships and earning logics requires a major shift not only in provider´s but also customer´s mind-sets. The essence of solution business is often linked to the ability to create "unique value" (Davies, Brady, and Hobday 2006; Miller et al. 2002). Brax & Jonsson (2009) argue that, despite numerous conceptualizations, unique value has one common denominator – customer focus. While solutions are delivered through relational processes (Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007), the provider should maintain a coherent focus onto its customer. However, in reality that is often missing (Gulati 2007).

We acknowledge that the research on solution business is not a novel research area. However, despite the booming literature on the service-dominant (S-D) logic approach, there is little work on its operationalization. Ng et al. (2012) call for studies that demonstrate empirically that S-D logic -based value proposition are possible. Furthermore, Kapletia and Probert (2010) argue for more narrow studies on business solution strategies and solution provider capabilities. The current research has treated solution suppliers as somewhat homogenous, whereas in practice industrial solution providers have a variety of different business strategies to choose from (Helander and Möller 2007). Alajoutsijärvi, Mainela, Salminen, et al. (2012) synthesize four empirically grounded configurations of organizing logics in project business delivering solutions, based on how unique the projects are and how the work within the supplier companies is coordinated. This reflects the importance of the context when studying project/solution business.

Furthermore, while solution business has increasingly received attention during the last decade, the majority of previous studies have focused on the supplying side. According to our solution provider interviews, the providers are often missing relevant information on customer needs and wants during the solution delivery process, especially with multi-faced customers whose decision processes are complex and perhaps built according to transactional business operations (see also Jacob, Kleipaß, and Pohl 2014). Also, solution providers are struggling to find a balance between unique value propositions to changing customer needs (e.g. Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) and more standardized service operations. It seems to be challenging to construct a solution offering in a manner that supports the core business instead of being a burden. Finally, it is also a matter of sales (Jokiniemi 2014; Schmitz and Ganesan 2014; Ulaga and Loveland 2014) and how the customers perceive the sales process.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand both the provider´s and customer´s solution business rationales – why solutions are provided or purchased and is there differences in how solution business is understood between providers and customers. To clarify somewhat scarce knowledge on especially customers' perspectives on solution business, the following research questions are set; (1) do the expectations and beliefs about solution business differ between providers and customers?, (2) how customers make purchasing decisions regarding complex solutions?, and (3) how customers experience and perceive the solution delivery process? However, in this work-in-progress paper, the work has been done regarding solution providers but still in progress concerning the customers' viewpoints.

## SOLUTION BUSINESS

In the 20th century, suppliers of technologically complex capital goods often required vertically integrated design, manufacturing and marketing organizations (e.g., Chandler 1992). Later, these large integrated companies have focused on their core competencies to be able to utilize their competitive advantages fully (Hamel and Prahalad 1994). Today, the trend seems to be providing solutions for the customer's entire process problems in one deal. S-D logic changes the overall mindset of suppliers from offering something to the customer to offering it with the customers (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

The idea of the increased role of customers is not new, as Drucker (1954, p. 35) stated, “it is the customer who … determines what a business is, what it produces, and whether it will prosper” and Levitt (1960) continued by emphasizing customer needs instead of selling products. Within S-D logic literature, Lusch et al. (2007) argue that effective competing through service requires the whole company to focus on itself and the market with S-D logic. The bottom line with the service-dominant logic is that marketing exchange shifts from transactional business to interactive value-creating episodes with customers (Ballantyne and Aitken 2007). Thus, the understanding of customer value is vital to industrial suppliers, which is well acknowledged in the wealth of research attention dedicated to this area (Anderson, Narus, and Van Rossum 2006; Lindgreen and Wynstra 2005; e.g., Payne and Holt 2001; Ulaga 2011).

### CUSTOMER VALUE

In theory, customer value is agreed to be a trade-off between all the relevant benefits and costs delivered by an offering through its lifetime (Blocker 2011), but in practice customers and suppliers have often different perceptions about what constitutes value for them (Anderson, Narus, and Van Rossum 2006; Corsaro and Snehota 2010; Möller 2006; Ulaga and Eggert 2005). A majority of the studies exploring the customer´s perception of value in industrial markets have focused on companies providing physical goods (Cannon and Homburg 2001; Menon, Homburg, and Beutin 2005; Ulaga 2003; Ulaga and Eggert 2006). The value of physical goods is often relatively straightforward to assess, unlike solutions, which are complex and service-intensive by nature, and difficult to assess objectively (Brady, Davies, and Gann 2005; Sawhney 2006). Customers may benefit from additional value in settings beyond traditional manufacturer-supplier relationships (Ulaga and Eggert 2005).

However, only few studies discuss value in solution business (Prior 2013). Preliminary research suggests that the value provided by solutions is context-dependent (Worm, Ulaga, and Zitzlsperger 2009), highlights intangible elements (Lindgreen et al. 2009) as well as irrational processes, such as emotional and social aspects (Prior 2013). In addition to the variety of exchanged products and services, providing solutions requires also constant interaction and reciprocal adaptation (Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007; Windahl and 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 the customer´s active involvement.

## NATURE OF SOLUTION BUSINESS

The literature on solutions is multidisciplinary with several overlapping concepts[1] that are employed to describe solution-oriented business. The different definitions are context-dependent and vary depending on the scope of the offering, the type of elements integrated, or type of industries studied (Lay, Schroeter, and Biege 2009). Furthermore, project business holds significant similarities with solutions (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2012; Cova and Salle 2007; Jalkala et al. 2010; Skaates and Tikkanen 2003).

Many of the solution business conceptualizations emphasize the nature of a solution through its different elements. The definition of a solution often includes customization and integration of goods and services to address a customer's business needs (e.g. Sawhney 2006). However, according to Tuli et al. (2007), customers tend to view solutions as ongoing relational processes in the buyer-seller relationship. Hence, in addition to the variety of exchanged products and services, providing solutions also requires constant interaction and reciprocal adaptation (Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007; Windahl and Lakemond 2010). Payne et al. (2008) refer to these relational processes as encounters which must aim at helping the customer utilize their own and the supplier's resources better. It can therefore be said that strong relationships and cooperation have high relevance in solution business.

In solution business, provider companies should focus on their customers' businesses by identifying the customers' latent needs (Matthing, Sandén, and Edvardsson 2004) as a collaborative process with the customers (Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007). The basic principle in solution business is that the outcome is greater than the mere sum of its parts (e.g., Roegner, Seifert, and Swinford 2001). This emphasizes the importance of how various elements are combined as a whole, and how customers perceive the value of that combination. Customers' sourcing of services has evolved to being more value-focused (Agndal et al. 2007). However, customers tend to have a different perception of value than suppliers (Lefaix-Durand and Kozak 2010).

[1] Some authors have even used different terms for the concept of solution across their articles, for example, Matthyssens and Vandenbempt have used both "value-added solution" (2008) and "integrated solutions" (2010).


**Figure 1. The four-phase relational solution process model by Tuli et al. (2007)**

Tuli et al. (2007) propose a four-phase relational solution process model: 1) customer requirements definition; 2) customization and integration of goods and/or services; 3) deployment; and 4) postdeployment customer support (see Figure 1). The model has been tested (Naudé et al. 2009), and the importance of relational aspects has been found to be accurate. The existing research also suggests that the value provided by solutions varies depending on contextual conditions (Worm, Ulaga, and Zitzlsperger 2009). These two aspects guide us in this study – we will clarify customer's solution perceptions throughout the four phase solution process as well as have different kinds of case companies to cover several different contextual situation.

## RESEARCH SETTING

Within business-to-business and industrial marketing research, case study research is the prevalent research strategy (Easton 2010). We have adopted the exploratory case study approach (Dyer Jr. and Wilkins 1991; Yin 2009) as the research strategy by focusing in-depth on our case companies. Case study also provides the opportunity to move between data and theory to gain novel insights into the problem (Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). Wiersema (2013) notes that, unlike consumer marketing, the business-to-business field suffers from a limited cache of relevant case studies, which might echo the diversity of unique business conditions in business-to-business and thus the need for more situation-specific approaches. This notion supports the selection of case study as the research strategy in this study, as solution business is unique by nature.

Dubois and Araujo (2007) claim that the case selection is the most important methodological decision. Yin (2009) conforms its criticality, but states also that the selection of the unit of analysis is important. In this study the unit of analysis is a company. Yin (ibid.) notes that in single-case studies, the cases are selected because they are unusually revelatory, extreme exemplars, or opportunities for unusual research access. In multiple-case studies, the cases should either support each other or give contrasting results (Yin 2009). Here, we have employed "theoretical sampling" (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, p. 27), as also called "purposive sampling" (Patton 2002, p. 2), to select the case companies carefully. As the focal phenomenon in this study is the customer versus provider perceptions on solution business, it was important to find case companies from both categories. Hence, this study is based on two research projects. The first one concentrated on solution providers and the currently ongoing one is focusing on solution customers. We have five provider cases and are gathering information from six customer cases, see Figure 2.

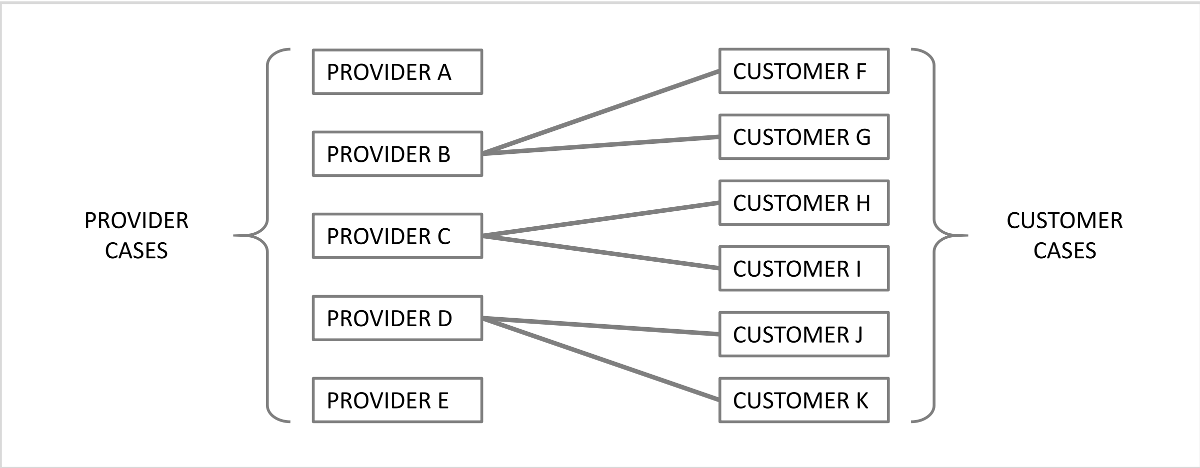


**Figure 2. Case companies and their provider-customer relationships**

Next, the data collection for both case types is shown.

PROVIDER DATA COLLECTION

We have revised the criteria employed by Kindström and Kowalkowski (2009) and chosen three principles for the selection of the case companies: 1) the company needs to have substantial manufacturing and solution business capabilities; 2) the company needs to have recently invested in its service development; 3) aiming at customer solutions has been a strategic-level decision. Based on these criteria, we selected five solution provider case companies (A–E) which operate in different contexts.

Company A supplies metal-based components, systems, and integrated systems to the construction and engineering industries. Its offering includes a range of metal products and services from bulk products to solutions for a wide range of customers. The company has made a clear strategic decision to transform from a bulk product supplier to solution provider and has high growth targets for service. Company B supplies environmental and industrial measurement products and services to customers in meteorology, airports, roads, defense, energy, and various other industries. The company's transition towards solution provider started in early 2003, but it has suffered setbacks and even temporarily halted the transition.

Company C is a mining technology company that offers technologies addressing the whole chain of processing ores into pure metals. Its annual service business growth rate is high, 75 per cent. The company's sales vary from mere technology packages and equipment deliveries to large turnkey deliveries. Company D provides smaller industrial solutions using polymer technology as their key expertise. They are eager to develop their business towards a more comprehensive solver of their customer's problems. Finally, company E is a filtration solution provider which operates in global mining and chemical markets. It has recently adopted a solution provider strategy, and significantly increased the role of service elements in their offering. It has actively developed its business model towards being a full service solution provider in every phase of its customers' business cycles.

From the five case companies, two (companies C and E) were participants in our two-year academic project. This gave us a better access to these companies, which may otherwise be a problem (Gummesson 1991). The academic project also provided a solid preconception of the two case companies, as well as to real-life practicing management of process technology industry (cf. Gephart 2004), which helped us researchers to understand the business environment in such a context. In the first data collection phase, altogether 29 personal interviews were conducted.

### CUSTOMER DATA COLLECTION

In order to get various insights from different angles, we have contacted three solution provider companies (companies B, C, and D) for access to their current solution customers. Hence, we will have customers acquiring three different solutions in terms of solution size, which will provide us information on how the extent of a solution affects to the customers' perceptions. Each solution provider have address two customer companies for our research purposes, combining altogether six customer cases, see Figure 2. The data will be collected by interviewing employees from different organizational levels – management, buyer, user, etc. Thus, we expect to have at least three interviews from each participating customer company.

## FINDINGS

We would like to emphasize the current work-in-progress nature of this paper. The findings presented here are based on only the solution provider data and hence lack the important customer viewpoints. Also, managerial implications will be discussed, in detail (Salminen, Oinonen, and Haimala 2014), after all data has been analyzed. However, based on our actual empirical case evidence, the four major findings so far are presented below.

First, the preliminary results show that the industrial solution business can be viewed through the lenses of the evolving service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2008). In their updated foundational premises, Vargo and Lusch (ibid., p. 7) argue that "service is the fundamental basis of exchange", "goods are a distribution mechanism for service provision", "operant resources are the fundamental source of competitive advantage", and "customer is always a co-creator of value". Although products are highly important in the capital goods industry, the results show that the role of the overall service and thus the operant resources attached to the solution is growing, and while the products will distribute the service provision, competitive advantage can be derived from the overall service. An industrial solution is an overall service for the customer, as it solves a customer's problem. Furthermore, the results strengthen the idea of customer as a co-creator in industrial solution business, and thus confirm the premise of customer being always a co-creator of value.

Second, based on the provider data, the three key issues in solution business are *collaboration*, *customer-oriented mindset*, and a *continuous development*. Close communication and mutual trust with a customer are necessary when aiming to benefit from sharing agreements. Moreover, a solution provider should understand its customer's business, as well as its customer's customers' value (see also Homburg, Wilczek, and Hahn 2014). That is the only way to be able to develop additional value for the customer's existing value creation processes. Finally, the nature of an industrial solution business offering is largely dynamic and agile. Solution providers must have the ability to seek and grasp new business opportunities provided by their customers' businesses. While the core idea in solution business is to offer specific customized solutions, the supplier must be able to adapt to an ever-growing mass of different customer needs. For this reason, the offering itself should have a basic set of building blocks that can be employed to create a customized solution for a variety of customer needs.

Third, the findings suggest that size may matter when analyzing capital good suppliers' ability to focus on the capital-intensive industrial solution business. The main factor here seems to be three-fold. The monetary value of solutions, such as outsourcing a part of a process, requires financial resources unreachable to relatively small companies. At least a financial partner is needed when the monetary value of the solution tops the capabilities of the supplier. On the other hand, the service-based nature of these industrial solutions means manpower; and in global business, a global reach in terms of agreed services elements, such as 24-hour emergency maintenance. Again, this issue can be solved with an extensive network of service partners, but then the quality of service will become a topical issue.

Fourth, the scale and type of the offering of suppliers may restrict their ability to enter the solution markets. If an industrial supplier's key products are for a customer's auxiliary manufacturing process, the customer might not focus their purchasing efforts to these smaller actors in the markets, but will let a third party engineering office to handle the acquisition (usually by tendering). To succeed in the solution business, however, the connection must be definitely between the supplier and the end customer.

Finally, these findings will give us a starting point for our further data collection from the customer companies. We hope that we can confirm our results so far, but also acknowledge that the results may be revised, at least in some extent. Our aim is to better understand the customers' perceptions on solution process in general. In detail, we are interested in what the providers should focus on during each four solution phase; 1) customer requirements definition; 2) customization and integration of goods and/or services; 3) deployment; and 4) postdeployment customer support. Also, we wish to have evidence on whether or not different contextual situation have a role in how solution business should be orchestrated – and how these factors should be managed.

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