

Explaining the sales and marketing interface: Perspectives on the production of B2B value propositions

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Abstract

We propose new perspectives, insights and explanations about the workings of the sales and marketing interface (SMI) in the production of business to business (B2B) value propositions. In particular we suggest that value proposition production at the SMI is a more dynamic and social phenomenon than that depicted in the extant literature such that practitioner versatility in reading and navigating context was deemed significant. Furthermore, our research uncovered a fragmented, heterogenous and tribal view of sales and marketing identities that stands in contrast to the portrayals of sales and marketing as monolithic functional entities. We present findings which aim to describe and explain the affective phenomena of actor identity, contextualisation and thought worlds in relation to value proposition production. These phenomena are understood to be aspects of the ‘spaces in-between’ sales and marketing that are distinct from and add to understandings of normative phenomena observed in the SMI literature which concern goals, roles, resource allocations, information flow, interaction processes, and performance incentives

Introduction

A central concern of this paper is understanding the enablers and barriers to effective SMI interworking in B2B value proposition development. We suggest an explanation of SMI interworking which can be understood as a space where B2B value propositions are produced. SMI interworking involves the collection, analysis, interpretation and use of market data, whereby market data can be taken to mean any information feeding back into the organisation from customer interactions. The notion of value proposition is an aspect of the extensive field of value scholarship that considers how value is defined, articulated, and presented to the customer prior to purchase (Woodruff 1997, Payne, Holt, 1999, Johnston 2014, Payne, Frow, & Eggert 2017). Value propositions are thus understood as the opening move in an exchange process with the customer (Bagozzi 1975; Ballantyne et al. 2011; Vargo & Lusch 2008) and can be usefully defined as:

‘... suggestions and projections of what impact on their practices customers can expect. When such a projection is proposed actively to customers, it is a promise about potential future value creation.’ (Gronroos & Ravald, 2011, p.14)

Value propositions are claimed by some scholars to be the ‘single most important organising principle’ for organisations (Webster 2002). The notion of value proposition production refers to the creation, maintenance, and development of value propositions whereby effective value propositions are seen as a reflected understanding of customer benefits and positive impact a

proposed solution may have for the customer (Barnes, Blake & Pinder 2009; Gronroos & Ravald 2011; Vargo & Lusch 2008). Despite the importance of value propositions, research suggests less than ten percent of companies formally develop value propositions (Payne & Frow 2014). Consequently, we seek to understand more about the nature of formally produced value propositions as an output of SMI interworking.

Literature

The SMI

The SMI is typically characterised as the interface between the organisational functions of sales and marketing. The number of studies of the SMI are limited (Dewsnap & Jobber 2002; Guenzi & Troilo 2007; Hughes et al. 2012; Le-Meunier-Fitzhugh & Piercy 2009) such that little attention has been given to the interface between marketing and sales units (Homburg & Jensen 2007). As far as can be identified there have been eight empirical studies into the effectiveness of the SMI, with two referring to the same data set (Homburg et al. 2008). Extant studies are mainly undertaken at the organisational level of analysis with a number of studies focussing on interface effectiveness as an end in itself (Dewsnap & Jobber 2000; Kotler et al. 2006; Snyder et al. 2016). Recent studies have attempted to develop causal links between SMI effectiveness and organisational competitiveness (Avlontis et al. 2015). Attempts have also been made to recognise that not all marketing and sales configurations are the same through providing taxonomies from life span and performance perspectives (Biemans, Brencic & Malshe 2010; Homburg, Jensen & Krohmer 2008; Kotler et al. 2006). Nevertheless, it is suggested that little has been done to challenge or develop these attempts to classify SMI configuration and overall, trends, explanatory theory, and causality are underdeveloped in the SMI literature.

SMI Dysfunction

A key theme in the literature concerns SMI dysfunction and suggested remedies. It has been observed that the SMI relationship is not working as effectively as it should be (Carpenter 1992, Le-Meunier-Fitzhugh & Piercy 2009). Indeed, the SMI is characterised by lack of cohesion, poor coordination, conflict, distrust and mutual negative stereotyping (Dewsnap & Jobber 2000). This dysfunction is described by Kotler, Rackham, and Krishnaswamy (2006) as inter- functional *warfare*. Only a minority of studies observe instances where that the SMI is operating effectively (Dawes & Massey 2005; Massey & Dawes 2007; Snyder et al. 2016). Conflicts are typically grounded in economic and cultural antagonism between sales and marketing (Kotler et al. 2006). Economic differences concern budget allocation, promotional spend priorities, pricing decisions, and normative concerns such as, goals, roles, incentives and rewards (Keszey & Biemans 2015, 2016; Strahle et al. 1996).

SMI Thought Worlds and Cultural Frames

Sales and marketing functions have different cultural frames or windows on the world (Beverland et al. 2006; Homburg & Jensen 2007). From a cultural standpoint it is claimed that sales and marketing have different 'world-views' such that the sales world is oriented around a small number of customer accounts and marketing views its world as the whole sector or market. Additionally, it has been observed that marketers tend to have a more formal education adept at

formal research, analysis, planning and communications, whereas sales people are cast as streetwise relationship builders who live for closing a sale. Little development of notions of cultural or cognitive differences has been undertaken in the last decade albeit attempts have been made to recognise the heterogeneity of marketing and sales configurations that has led to the production of taxonomies from life span and performance perspectives (Biemans, Brencic & Malshe 2010; Homburg, Jensen & Krohmer 2008; Kotler et al. 2006). Indeed these differences in perspective have been characterised by Homburg and Jensen (2007) as differences between the thought worlds of marketing and sales.

SMI and functional credibility

A key theme within the discussion of SMI dysfunction and thought worlds concerns differing perceptions of professional credibility between sales and marketing. Credibility refers to whether a source of information is perceived as believable (Bettinghaus 1989). Studies of sales perspectives of marketing indicate that sales people hold prejudice, disrespect for the marketing function and do not believe marketing people are able to provide strategic direction (Yandle & Blythe 2000). This in turn leads them to dismiss marketing colleagues as credible partners (Strahle et al. 1996). Credibility for sales professionals includes cognitive and affective dimensions relating to real world customer facing expertise, a sense of proximity to the customer, perceived trustworthiness of marketing colleagues in terms of keeping promises and arguing for sales initiatives (Dholakia & Strenthal 1987; Newell & Goldsmith 2001; Sharma 1990). Credibility for marketing professionals involves both negative and positive perspectives (Beverland Steel and Dapiran 2006, Homburg and Jensen 2007, Tushman 1977). Negative stereotyping of sales people by marketing (Beverland et al 2006) indicated a deep seated cultural assumption that salespeople would have little interest in contributing to strategy formation. Four key marketing perspectives of sales were noted; firstly sales has a narrow role and merely carries out the strategy given to them, secondly sales focus on immediate customer needs rather than long term business needs, thirdly customer information provided sales was seen as idiosyncratic and not useful as it could not be generalised, fourthly sales merely react to individual customer demands rather than understand overall market drivers of business growth. Some marketers were more positive and regarded sales as a key source of market insights and innovation which led to the development of informal relationships with sales in order to find out more about specific customers. Sales were therefore seen by some marketers as a crucial *boundary spanning* role, linking the organisations internal networks with external customers (Tushman 1977) and thus a source of organisational learning (Senge et al 1994)

Implications for SMI interworking

The organisational and interpersonal issues of sales 'buy-in' of marketing strategies, reconciling and working with different thought worlds stand out as key implications in the literature. The conventional SMI literature focuses on economic and process interaction differences which manifest themselves as normative recommendations (Malshe et al. 2016). That said cultural and cognitive issues have surfaced in the SMI literature on isolated occasions with non-normative explanatory theories absent in the literature. The SMI literature can be modeled as the spaces in-between marketing and sales in the following way.

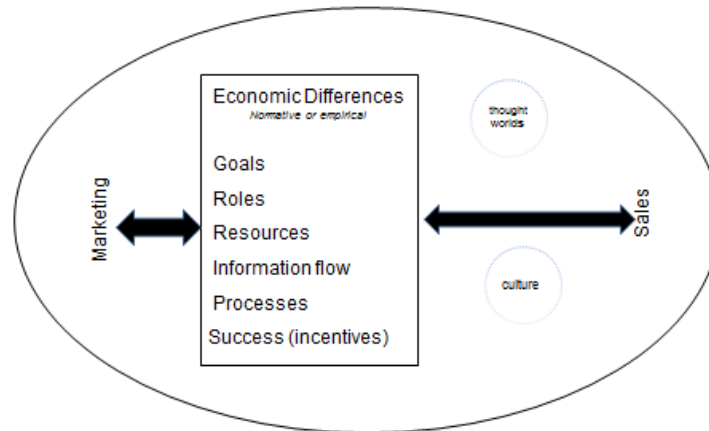


Fig1. Depicting spaces in between marketing and sales (Source: Kelly 2017)

Value Propositions

Sales and marketing actors are responsible for developing, producing, and articulating value propositions with and to customers. A value proposition is as a promise of value that is gained sometime in the future (Gronroos & Ravald 2011; Kowalkowski 2011; Vargo & Lusch 2008). Value proposition creation is seen as a critical strategic issue for marketing managers (Kowalkowski 2011; Payne & Frow 2014). The significance and centrality of the value proposition in terms of its organisational and customer purpose is explained by Eggert, Ulaga, Frow and Payne (2018) who state that:

‘Value propositions capture the essence of marketing strategy decisions and signal strategic priorities to the supplier organization and its customers.’

Nevertheless, scant attention has been given to the production of value propositions as a key output produced by actors within the two functions of sales as marketing. Indeed as Frow and Payne (2011) note there is a paucity of in depth research into the notion of value proposition generally despite the original use of the term by Bower and Garda in 1985 which Ballantyne et al (2011) define as:

‘the marketing offer or value promise formulated and communicated by a seller, with the intent that it be accepted by a buyer’.

Value propositions as an output on the stage of the SMI

In the context of this paper a value proposition (VP) is regarded as something that is produced by actors engaging at the SMI such that an enterprise can only propose value to its customers (Vargo and Lusch 2011b) The production of value propositions is therefore concerned with the nature and extent of interaction, dialogue, and sense making that takes place between sales actors, marketing actors and customers. Viewing VP production at the SMI from a social standpoint is distinct from the mainstream marketing management problem solving approach which seems to view a value proposition as an objective self-creating artefact absent of human

involvement. To date there appears to have been little or no empirical research into how actors in the SMI work to produce value propositions, consequently we are concerned with actor relations, interactions and networks in line with the Industrial Management and Purchasing (IMP) school (Hakansson & Snehota 1990). A social perspective therefore implies that value production involves the capability and competence of the human actor such that it embodies customer and competitor understanding that leads competitive advantage for the supplier, which Kowalkowski (2011, p.277) explains as:

'The ability to communicate a firm's value propositions strategically and effectively is a new era for the development of competence of the heart of competitive advantage' (Kowalkowski 2011, p.277).

We therefore propose that the nature of how value-propositions are produced is at least as important as what they end up looking like. To summarise the SMI constitutes a space between the functions of sales, marketing and customer. This space is where value propositions are produced by social actors involving thought world and cultural dimensions and can be modeled as the spaces in-between marketing, sales and customers in the following way.

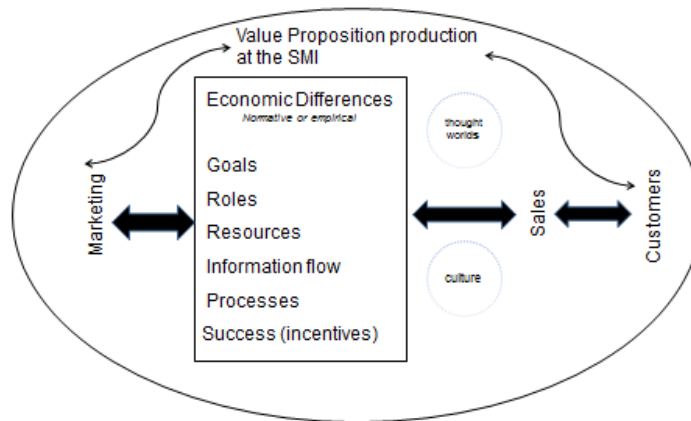


Fig. 2 - Spaces in between marketing and sales in relation to value proposition production (Kelly 2017)

Methodology

Our approach is grounded in a Critical Realist philosophy (Bhaskar 1988) and is aligned to the thinking of IMP scholars such as: Easton, Ehret, Harrison, Nicholson, and Peters (Easton 2010; Ehret 2013; Harrison & Easton 2002; Peters et al. 2013). The sociological perspective we take consequently invites attention towards identifying and understanding the generative mechanisms available in the SMI for productive interaction and effective value proposition origination (Danermark et al. 2002; Easton 2010; Fletcher 2016). Our research was a qualitative research

study of 21 sales and marketing professionals. The sample reflected experiences in 17 companies and 14 industry sectors. Participant data was collected through depth interviews, thematically analysed and coded (Boyatzis 1988). We used retroductive and abductive strategies (Danermark et al. 2002) to produce insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of SMI inter-working. The interpretation of the transcript data was also sensitised to theoretical ideas from outside conventional marketing management literature drawing from, identity theory (Lawler 2014, Mafessoli 2016), anthropology (Schein 2010) and theology (Harrower 2001).

Findings

Three dominant themes of interest emerged from the data; identity, contextualisation and thought worlds. It is proposed that each of these phenomena has a generative influence of the production of value propositions and the SMI. Each will be considered in turn,

Identity

Marketing and sales practitioners have a strong sense of their self-image and how others in the organisation see them. 'Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others' (Weeks 1990, p.88). To that end actors were found to be engaged in purposeful construction and presentation of 'self' (Goffman 1959) at the SMI and used their identity to achieve credibility when producing value propositions. Five aspects of identity emerged from the data and were themed as: *Not a single entity, distant versus adjacent, customer exposure, multifaceted nature, pejorative and processual*.

Not a single entity underscored the observation that practitioners did not recognise themselves as belonging to monolithic entities known as marketing or sales. The notion of *distant versus adjacent* was used by respondents to identify colleagues in terms of how near or far they seemed to both themselves and the customer. The notions of *adjacency* (Gagnier 2000) or *distance versus proximity* (Nicholson, Tsagdis & Brennan 2013) were helpful in refining the general idea of distant versus adjacency. In this way a further three aspects of distance and adjacency emerged; *generic versus specific marketing*: (practice proximity) *central versus local*: (organisational proximity) and *'inside out' versus 'outside in'*: (philosophical proximity). *Customer exposure* referred to the way in which marketers were identified by sales professionals as having either a lot or little direct exposure to customers. A lot of direct customer exposure was seen by sales as a 'good thing'. *Multi-faceted nature* referred to how marketing and sales practitioners acknowledged how marketing functionaries played a role in producing value propositions that comprised complementary or conflicting activities. *Pejorative and Processual*: referred to how marketing practitioners noted how their identity evolved over time. Moving from a pejorative 'Golf ball and umbrella marketing' to something they saw as more meaningful and credible in terms of strategic brand management.

Respondent, Norma, a Senior Marketing Manager in a Global IT company, captures a number of the facets of identity and how they changed over the course of her career, from a 'mouse-mat marketer' to a senior advisor:

"So, I think previously, and this is just because of the roles that I was in, I would say I was in more of a marketing communications role. So producing the assets for people to use but not actually then explaining and educating to them about sales enablement, why they've got what they've got, what they need to use it for. I was just literally producing it. But as I've gone further through my career, you know, I'm on leadership teams; I'm advising them about what they should be doing, what they shouldn't be doing; so therefore, they see you as adding value to them rather than just someone who can book meetings, etcetera, etcetera, or get mouse mats, mugs and pens."

From these explanations it was possible to construct typifications of sales and marketing role identities that emerged are depicted as following personas. **Distant Deidre** - sees herself as distant from sales occupying a 'factory' type role **where** no consultation with sales is required for VP production, **Ivory Tower Ian** - university educated. Develops 'value propositions' based entirely on desk research, not 'real world' interactions with sales or customers, **Trench fighting Trevor** - fighting alongside sales people. Engaged with customers and sales in producing value propositions. Usually in a role adjacent to sales **e.g.** industry marketing, **Product pushing Pete** - typically a product marketer. Viewed pejoratively by sales and 'real' marketers alike for always pushing product features, **Generic Geoff** - produces generic marketing based on a surface level understanding of a market seen to be of little utility to sales, **Specific Sheila** - produces value propositions very specific to individual customers or opportunities, viewed as highly relevant by salespeople (Kelly 2017) We propose therefore that activation of effective value proposition production at the SMI the notion of Identity can be recognised as a generative mechanism with a tendency for causal power in value proposition production (Danermark et al. 2002; Easton 2010; Fletcher 2016). Sales and marketing proximity encourages closer collaboration and understanding of customer issues and value proposition development can be enhanced. Failure to recognise the tribal nature of marketing, will promote a tendency for value destruction (Chubb 1990; Simon, Stierlin, and Wynne (1985). The place of identity in relation to value proposition production in the SMI can be modelled as follows:

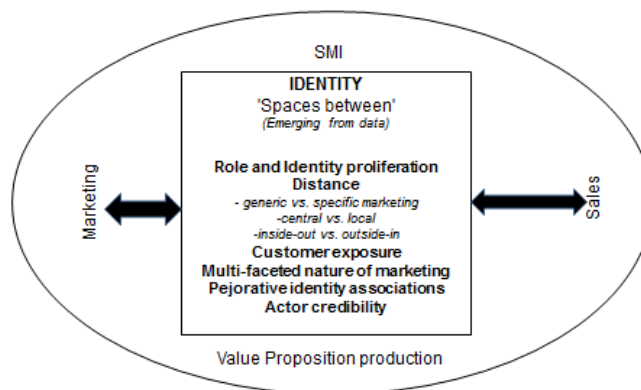


Fig.3 Identity: Spaces in-between marketing and sales in relation to value proposition production (Kelly 2017)

Contextualisation

A variety of contexts in which value propositions were developed was identified. Respondents noted the need to be fluid and responsive to this context heterogeneity. The word ‘context’ originates from the Latin contextus, where con is ‘together’ and texere is ‘to weave’. It is proposed that context sensitivity is therefore highly relevant to effective SMI interworking because it is the place where sales and marketing ‘come together’ to ‘weave’ value propositions based on customer understanding. These contexts can be summarised as follows; **Individual deal:** VP has to be set in the context of single deal, **Opportunity:** VP has to be set in context of an opportunity in an customer account or market, **Product:** VP has to be able to contextualise value that a new product can promise (so called supply side contexts), **Macro-Micro:** VP has to traverse macro environment customer exists in and individual context of customer, **Industry vertical:** VP has to pay attention to issues that may be faced in an industry vertical e.g. Pharmaceuticals, **Economic context:** VP has to take account of prevailing economic conditions and promise economic value (so called buyer side contexts). Skepticism towards a "one size fits all" approach to marketing to customers, was expressed by one respondent like this:

"... a frustration for my team as well, was when marketing were trying to use a one size fits all blunt instrument in terms of the way they wanted to position propositions for a million client universe" Respondent Jeff.

Respondents suggested actors at the SMI need to develop value propositions that can be layered up and down the identified contexts namely: meta, macro, meso (vertical), meso (horizontal), micro, and nano individual actor level. We call this phenomenon, Contextual Layering. This can be modelled in the following way in which so called sophistication gaps were noted as the lack competence in being able to move up and down the contextual layers.

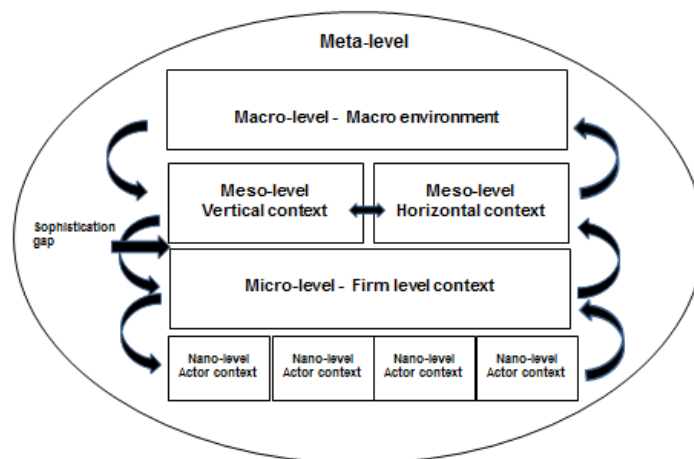


Fig 4. Contextual layering - developing value propositions up and down the contexts (Kelly 2017)

Contextualisation praxis and the production of value propositions at the SMI

In seeking to find a way to make sense of contextualisation practice, thought provoking perspectives can be found in the non-managerial literature of theology. Harrower (2001 p13) defines two contrasting approaches to the communication of religious scripture which he terms the the evangelical model that starts from a ‘given scripture’ that is delivered in a prescriptive and unyielding manner to an audience and the liberation praxis model which starts from an understanding of ‘life in this place’ and contextualising the delivery of scripture to that place. The analogy we draw here is between dogmatic application of text book marketing principles and methods resulting in ‘inside out’ product centric sales and marketing and ‘outside in’ customer context-based sales and marketing such that attention is given to the uniqueness and idiosyncrasies of a customer’s time and place. In summary we model context at the SMI as follows:

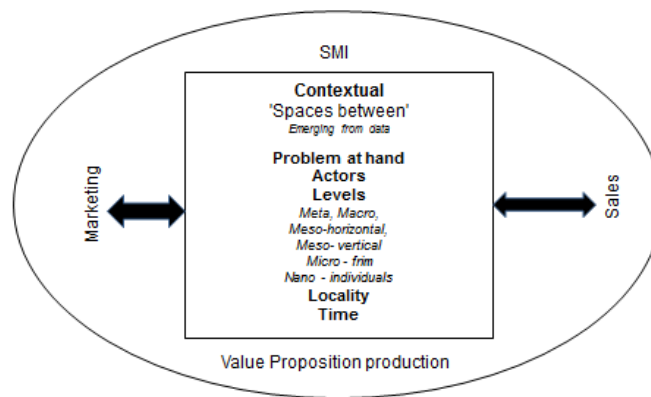


Fig. 5 contextual spaces 'in between' marketing and sales (Kelly 2017)

The two elements discussed so far are considered to be important phenomena in the space between marketing, sales and the customer at the SMI.

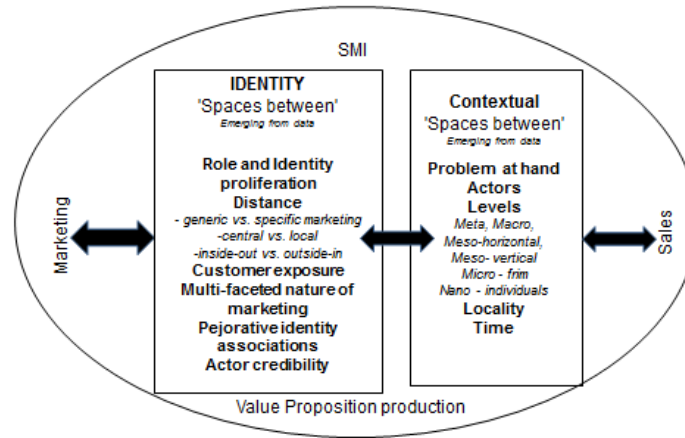


Fig. 6 Identity and contextual spaces 'in between' marketing and sales (Kelly 2017)

Thought Worlds

Actors at the SMI do not think about the world in the same way. This reflects the existence of micro-cultures or tribes (Mafessoli 2016; Schein 2010) that emerged from the data. The notion of thought world 'Encompasses a culture's logic, ontology, epistemology, and values...it can be defined as a culturally adapted mode of thought' (Carpenter 2004, p.47). Carpenter's ideas provide a helpful lens through which to view value proposition production at the SMI can be viewed and Kotler, Rackham, & Krishnaswamy (2006) give a useful characterisation of what is going on in in relation to these differing world views.

'Sales departments tend to believe that marketers are out of touch with what's really going on in the marketplace. Marketing people, in turn, believe the sales force is myopic, too focused on individual customer experiences, insufficiently aware of the larger market and blind to the future. In short, each group undervalues the other's contributions' (Kotler et al. 2006, p.70).

Similarly, respondent Maurice explained a similar situation when talked of the struggle to achieve collaboration and cohesion:

"I think we've wrestled to bring together the different worlds of sales and marketing to align around the customer and how by meeting the customers' needs we can then satisfy stakeholders and ourselves."

Differences emerged concerning what sales and marketing actors regarded as valid professional scope of focus and activity (Beverland et al. 2006). Several distinct world view orientations emerged from the data. Customer versus Product view, Short versus Long Term view, Deal versus Customer/Market view, Opportunity versus Strategy view, Inside out versus Outside in view, and Holistic versus Atomistic view. It is possible to portray this as a continuum and position world views accordingly in the following way:

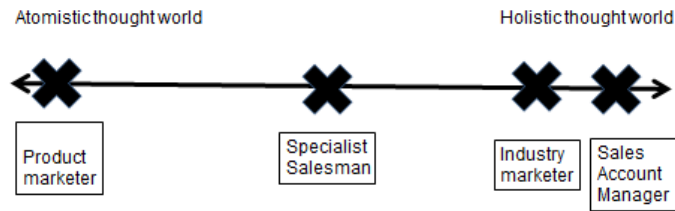


Fig.7 Thought world differences along atomistic holistic continuum (Kelly 2017)

The notion of Thought World can be modelled in the following way.

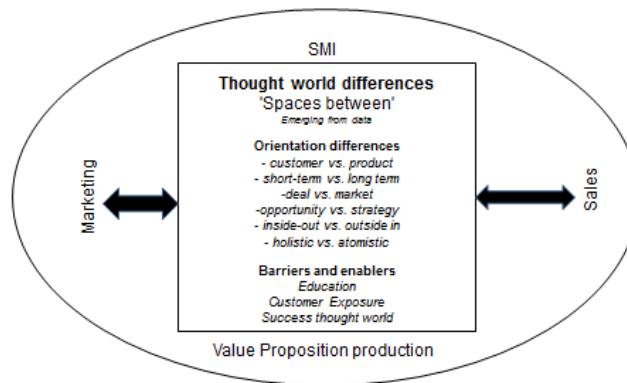


Fig. 8 - Thought world spaces in between at SMI for value proposition production (Kelly 2017)

We have considered value proposition production at the SMI as a concern with the spaces in between and sensitised our investigation to aspects of subjective interpretation from a sociological perspective. The affective dimensions of identity, context and thought word can be brought together in this cumulative explanatory model.

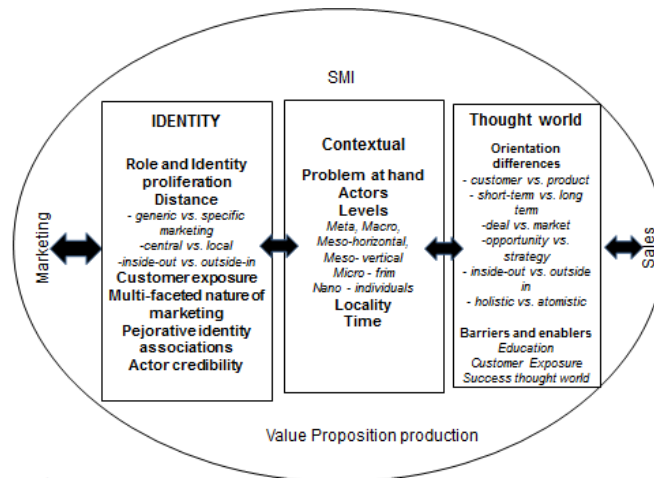


Fig. 9 Spaces in between - cumulative model of actual and real differences (Kelly 2017)

Implications for practice and further research

In providing explanations about how the SMI works to produce value propositions respondents often went beyond normative descriptions of what was going on at the place known in the literature as ‘the interface’, or SMI (Kotler et al. 2006; Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy 2011; Rouzies et al. 2005). Many respondent narratives, especially from marketers, reflected a concern or allegiance to a tribal identity (Mafessoli 2016). Contextualisation; understanding and being able to hold dialogues at the SMI that place value propositions into the appropriate context was a major theme that emerged from respondent narratives. The thought worlds of sales and marketing actors were seen as an important generative mechanism for effective SMI dialogue. Together the three main themes that emerged from the data indicate that actors see beyond the normative recommendations that typically inhabit extant SMI literature (Kotler et al. 2006; Snyder et al. 2016; Strahle et al. 1996). The three themes and their components were:

- Actor Identity
 - The actor’s perception of self in the SMI.
 - Using identity to achieve credibility when producing value propositions.
- Contextualisation
 - The perceived importance significant actors place on contextualisation for value proposition production.
 - Actor understanding of contextualised value proposition production at the SMI.
- Thought worlds
 - The perceived differences in thought worlds of actors in marketing and sales.
 - The role thought worlds play at the SMI specifically in relation to value proposition production.

Our findings add a different perspective to the largely normative recommendations that emerge from SMI literature. These affective concerns such as thought worlds may have appeared on the odd occasion in SMI literature (Homburg & Jensen 2007) but have not as yet been developed theoretically. We present an integrated framework that recognises that these affective phenomena are additive to the normative recommendations emanating from extant literature (Kotler et al. 2006; Snyder et al. 2016; Strahle et al. 1996). While the normative recommendations can help write the script for 'the play', the affective recommendations emerging from my thesis can facilitate 'dramatic realisation' for the actors on the SMI stage (Goffman 1959).

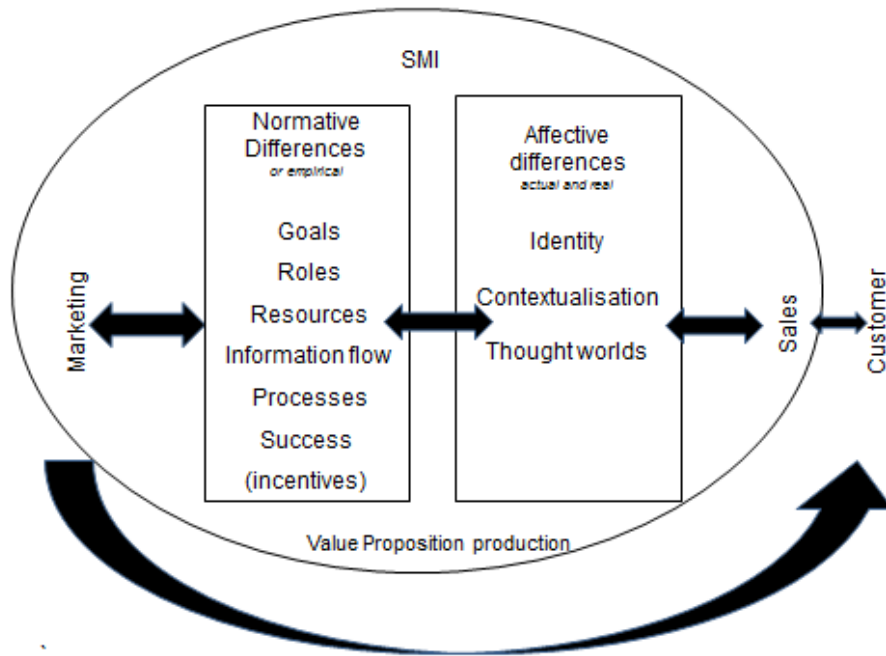


Fig.10 An integrated framework: SMI interworking for value proposition production (Source: Author)

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