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Theory map of business marketing: Relationships and networks perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Business marketing is a complex, multilayered, and dynamic social phenomenon that has been examined using a variety of theories from disciplines as diverse as economics and psychology. This theoretical evolution has led to a fragmented knowledge base. This article examines relationship marketing and business networks perspectives in business marketing. Based on an extensive metatheoretical review, the study shows that these approaches are based on incompatible theoretical assumptions and cannot be integrated into a general relationship marketing theory. By constructing an articulated theory map, the paper provides a positioning space and analysis of five approaches to business marketing: CRM, behaviorally driven relationship marketing, channel relationships, market as networks and actor relationships, and focal networks and strategic nets. The paper then suggests pursuing the development of two middle-range theories: "market-based business marketing" and "network-based business marketing." These developments are used to offer an articulated research agenda for advancing business marketing theory and a discussion on the possibility of a general theory of marketing.

1. Introduction

There have been several calls in recent years for stronger theory development in marketing (Yadav, 2010). These calls comprise several important themes. They include: a quest for developing a general theory of marketing, based primarily on service-dominant logic (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2010); ideas of integrating separate but interrelated streams of research, especially relationship marketing and the network approach (Gummesson & Mele, 2010; Vargo & Lusch, 2011); embracing and developing the pluralistic character of marketing theory, involving multiple research approaches (Möller, Pels, & Saren, 2009); and examining the role of middle-range theories, providing a mediating link between empirical research and abstract general theories (Brodie, Saren, & Pels, 2011). This paper continues the discussion and probes the extent to which current relationship marketing theory and the network approach can serve as an integrated base for more general theory for business marketing. Before articulating this broad aim, a brief background is provided.

The pursuit of greater theoretical clarity is most welcome because of the eclectic character of marketing discipline. Peters and her colleagues have noted that business marketing has drawn upon a number of different theoretical perspectives from domains as diverse as organizational theory, systems analysis, economics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, & Johnston, 2011). This theoretical fragmentation is related to the complex, multilayered, and dynamic character of marketing phenomena. For example, business marketing as a research domain can be conceived of comprising several interrelated or nested layers (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Möller et al., 2009):

- Individuals and their behaviors (behaviors of customers and sellers);
- Groups and their behaviors (sales teams, buying centers, DMUs);
- Organizations or firms and their behaviors (marketing and customer organizations, other relevant actors);
- Functions and their behaviors (marketing as a function and its interactions with other company functions);
- Management (marketing as specialized and institutionalized management);
- Interorganizational behaviors (between suppliers and customers);
- Institutional systems and their dynamics (e.g., distribution channels, networked ecosystems); and
- Markets, industries, and cultures and their dynamics (forming the context of marketing and consummating behaviors).

This layered character has had significant consequences for theory development. The complexity of the core phenomena in different layers has resulted in different research traditions in several sub-domains/layers, such as transactional marketing versus relationship marketing and the market versus channel system versus the network view of the context of marketing activities.

The evident theoretical fragmentation has led to a search for conceptual unification in order to overcome communication barriers between scholars working in different traditions and to enhance consistent theory development. This is reflected in the pursuit of combining seemingly closely related research traditions into more coherent theories. An

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important case is relationship marketing theory, which draws on such diverse sources as services marketing, interactive marketing, business networks, and channel relationships, and which relates to both business and consumer marketing (Gummesson & Mele, 2010; Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006). The aim of the unification approach is the construction of a general theory of marketing (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2011).

There are several open issues in this commendable endeavor. For example, to what extent can the 'root' approaches to the new general theory be integrated? This is a moot point, which depends on the relative commensurability of metatheoretical assumptions concerning the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of the root theories (Arndt, 1985; Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Another issue is the need to complement the emerging general theory with more detailed domain- or context-specific theories that will provide narrower but more articulated theoretical propositions and managerial guidelines. This pursuit, sometimes labeled as building theories of middle range (Brodie et al., 2011; Merton, 1967), requires a sophisticated understanding of world-view assumptions of root theories that are to be integrated into a coherent paradigm at a greater level of abstraction (Möller & Halinen, 2000).

This paper will focus on the relationship marketing (RM) and business network perspectives (BN) and examine their role in advancing business-marketing theory. Why select these theories or approaches? First, relationship marketing has become the dominant view in business marketing studies. A content analysis of articles in business marketing journals indicates that the share of articles addressing relationships has increased consistently since 2000, whereas the relative number of articles on buying behavior, selling, and sales management and segmentation has declined since the early 1990s (Dant & Lapuka, 2008; LaPlaca, 2008). Second, relationships and networks have been shown to play a pivotal role in customer–supplier interaction and relationship formation as well as in the networked emergence of new business fields (Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005; Möller & Svahn, 2009; Ulaga, 2003). Third, and most importantly, relationships, interaction, and actor networks employ principal positions in the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) informed inquiry into the actor-actor value-co-creation perspective (Vargo & Lusch, 2008a, 2008b) and form the core of the value creation theory of marketing, which is evolving (Gummesson & Mele, 2010; Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2010).

Because of this pivotal role given to the relationship marketing and network approach, it is essential we clearly understand their underlying worldviews and core assumptions. To this end, the paper will provide a metatheoretical analysis and mapping of the relationship marketing and network approaches to business marketing. It will challenge the increasingly widespread belief that relationship marketing provides an integrated theoretical paradigm encompassing research related to both consumer and business relationships as well as interorganizational networks (Gummesson & Mele, 2010; Grönroos, 2011). Continuing and expanding the work of Möller and his colleagues (Möller & Halinen, 2000; Möller et al., 2009; Pels, Möller, & Saren, 2009), it will be shown that the relationship marketing and networks approaches are actually constructed by relatively broad and fragmented research traditions that cannot be combined into any single approach because of their unique content and divergent ontological and epistemological premises. This ambitious goal corresponds to the "theory assessment and enhancement" part of Yadav's scheme of strategies for theory development (Yadav, 2010).

How does this paper differ from the mentioned extant work? Möller and Halinen (2000) examined the disciplinary roots of emerging relationship marketing and proposed that relationship marketing research should be divided into market-based and network-based orientations, whereas Pels et al. (2009) studied the main research traditions in business marketing—the marketing management school, channels research tradition, relationship marketing, interaction, and network approach, and the Service Dominant Logic—and promoted the adoption of a multi-theory perspective. By focusing exclusively on the relationship marketing and network approaches, this paper will provide a more profound analysis on the disciplinary foundations and ontological assumptions of the research traditions forming these approaches. The resulting critical metatheoretical assessment (for metatheoretical analyses in marketing and management see, e.g., Arndt, 1985; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Möller et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) provides:

- A theory-based understanding of the current research in business marketing as well as its strong points, limitations, and potential white areas. It offers a theory map for more cognizant navigation among the various partial theories addressing business relationships.
- A basis for proposing a contingency-based research agenda for the systematic advancement of middle-range theories for business marketing.
- Guidelines for advancing general theory focused on value creation.

In sum, the paper contributes to the advancement of business marketing theory by offering an enhanced understanding of the nature of current theory by challenging current views on the unifiability of the relationship marketing and business network approaches, and by providing a market versus network-based contingency view for the further development of business marketing theory. This should be seen as part of the ongoing critical discourse on marketing theory.

The next section discusses the principles of metatheoretical analysis and provides the criteria for assessing the RM and BN approaches. Then, drawing heavily on the available reviews, a theory map containing five sub-theories of RM and BN is proposed. These are suggested to be classifiable into two major categories based on the context of the exchange and the nature of the exchange: market-based relationship marketing and the business network approach. The paper concludes with a discussion on the theoretical consequences of these propositions and offers suggestions for further theory development. The results will be explicitly linked to the current debate on the theoretical unification versus the multi-theory view on constructing marketing theory and on general theory possibilities established by the value-creation view of marketing.

2. Basics of metatheoretical analysis

Extant research suggests that several intertwined research streams in marketing since the 1970s have influenced the emergence of relationship marketing and business networks as important schools of business marketing thought (Egan, 2008; Eiriz & Wilson, 2006; Möller & Halinen, 2000; Pels et al., 2009). These streams include services research, customer–supplier relationships, and interaction in business marketing research concerning marketing channel relationships, and more pragmatic knowledge concerning the emerging practices of database and direct marketing (subsequently termed interactive marketing). The industrial network approach, which emerged in the early 1990s, is the last piece in the relationship-marketing puzzle.

The role of these streams in understanding the current RM and BN is crucial. They are not only the roots or sources of current relationship marketing, but actually the streams of research that constitute RM and BN. The fact that these research streams are not monolithic makes matters even more complicated. Their researchers draw from a variety of disciplines and theories, ranging from economics and the organizational sciences to political science and social psychology. This disciplinary multiplicity is depicted in Fig. 1 and builds primarily on the work of Möller and Halinen (2000) and Eiriz and Wilson (2006).

This framework can be used to explicate a number of theoretical questions raised in the introduction. Do the current RM and BN research traditions form coherent middle-range theories of business marketing or are they too fragmented for that? More optimistically, can the RM and BN research traditions be merged into a single overarching lens to explain business marketing phenomena? Gummesson and Mele (2010) have recommended the second view.

These questions can be approached using the two dimensions Okhuysen and Bonardi (2011) proposed to evaluate and construct