



Maximizing buyer–supplier relationships in the Digital Era: Concept and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

As technology continues to advance and new products emerge, the interactions between buyers and suppliers have changed. The management of buyer–supplier relationships has increasingly become more dependent on new technologies, such as Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems and computer-mediated communications (CMC). Furthermore, when new technologies emerge, suppliers are expected to educate their buyers about the benefits of the technology, train them on how to use it, and aid with the integration of the technology into pre-existing work processes. Given these issues, this special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management* explores the changing nature of buyer–supplier relationships in the Digital Era. This article presents a snapshot of the changes in buyer–supplier relationships brought on by new technology, provides an overview of the selected articles in this special issue, and offers a few directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Managing buyer–supplier relationships has always been crucial to firm success. In order to properly manage these relationships, buyers and suppliers must maximize trust and cooperation, minimize opportunism and risk, and collaborate on setting and accomplishing goals (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998). These activities all require open and extensive communication channels. However, in the Digital Era, these communication channels have changed (Nohria & Eccles, 1992; Song, Berends, Van Der Bij, & Weggeman, 2007). Buyer–supplier relationships are less dependent on face to face communications and more dependent on digital communications (McIvor & Humphreys, 2004). Furthermore, the ongoing emergence of new technologies, such as Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) and social media, has made effective communications even more crucial as firms decide which technologies are appropriate for them and their supply chain partners (Ganesan, 1994; Seppanen, Blomqvist, & Sundqvist, 2007). It is crucial for both buyers and suppliers to understand how these new technologies affect their relationships and how these technologies can be optimized.

While a great deal of published research on customer–firm relationships in the Digital Age has focused on end users and consumer markets, much less research has dealt with the impact of digital communications on the relationships between buyers and suppliers in industrial marketing. Therefore, this special issue of *Industrial Marketing*

Management focuses on the role of industrial or B2B buyer–supplier relationships in the Digital Era. Conceptual, empirical and case-based manuscripts were invited with potential topics including: optimizing communication through technology, the role of the buyer–supplier relationship in technology adoption, minimizing risk through technology, the evolving role of the supplier in the digital era, and the potential pitfalls of technology in buyer–supplier relationships. From 26 submitted papers, and after 3 rounds of review, we assembled 7 manuscripts that truly captured this theme. With topics including open innovation in new product development, disruptive technologies, Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems, and customer value creation, this special issue covers a variety of hot button topics that all center around the buyer–supplier relationship. While we believe this special issue strongly contributes to the topics at hand, we believe that the opportunity to conduct research in this area will continue to grow as new technologies emerge and buyer–supplier relationships evolve. Next, we offer an outline of the current state of this stream of research, give an overview of the articles in this issue, and then suggest an agenda for future research.

2. Technology's current role in buyer–supplier relationships

Before exploring the role of technology in today's buyer–supplier relationships, it makes sense to explain the term “Digital Era.” As noted by Sambamurthy and Zmud (2000, p. 106), “the contemporary digital economy is characterized first and foremost by convergence across the computing, communication, and content industries. This convergence presents unparalleled business opportunities for redefining the nature of customer relationships, products and services, business

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partnerships, and economic markets within and outside the enterprise.” Furthermore, while this convergence has increased the number of opportunities available to companies, it has also increased competition on a global scale. Many industries have become hyper-competitive and the most successful firms have been those that can combine IT capabilities with business savvy and preexisting relationships while remaining flexible and open to change (D’Aveni, 1994; Sambamurthy & Zmud, 2000; Venkatraman, 1997).

Given this definition, this special issue explores the evolving role and impact of new technologies in buyer–supplier relationships. For example, the ability to negotiate effectively and consummate deals that are both fair and equitable has long been an issue of contention in buyer–supplier relationships. The problems that often occur in these relationships may center on pricing or agreed upon customer services that are part of contractual agreements (Lancioni, 2005). As explored in this issue, new digital technologies can help to mitigate these problems as they allow for quicker communications between supply chain partners and truncated negotiation times. However, while the advantages of new technologies may be obvious, a number of caveats need to be addressed as well. As suppliers prepare to introduce new technologies to customers, buying firms or employees may not be quite ready to accept new products. This disparate range of IT capabilities may cause inequalities between buyers and suppliers and lead to shifts in power in a given relationship. Therefore, this issue not only looks at the positive aspects of new technologies, but also considers the potentially negative impacts that new technologies can introduce to a buyer–supplier relationship.

3. Articles in the special issue

This special issue consists of seven original research papers that provide varying perspectives on buyer–supplier relationships in the Digital Era. The papers are split into two broad topic areas. First, we cover the role of technology in the management of supply chain partner relationships. Articles in this section focus on the impact of new technologies on partner communications, customer satisfaction, strategic alliances, and more. Second, we address the role of the buyer–supplier relationship in technology acceptance. Articles in this section analyze the influence of a pre-existing supplier relationship on the adoption of new technology and the role of the supplier in preparing buyers for new technologies.

3.1. *The role of technology in partner relationship management*

Opening the special issue is an article by Alexander Stein, Michael Smith, and Richard Lancioni entitled, “The development of customer relationship management (CRM) intelligence in business-to-business environments.” While CRM systems have become common place in B2B relationships, the authors claim that CRM data is underutilized for strategic planning purposes. Within the article, the authors develop procedures for categorizing CRM information in a style that is intended to help guide strategic management decisions. By approaching CRM data in this manner, managers can gain an increased understanding of their client relationships, including the optimal directionality of buyer–supplier decision-making processes and the key antecedents of strategic decisions across deals. The authors suggest that their approach can result in an improved use of valuable historical data for strategic and operational decision-making in a B2B setting.

The second manuscript, entitled “Making partner relationship management systems work: The role of partnership governance mechanisms,” was developed by Chris Storey and Canan Kocabasoglu-Hillmer. This original research article addresses the emerging topic of Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems. The authors note that the performance implications of PRM systems are not generally well understood and aim to resolve this issue by investigating the role of partnership governance mechanisms on the effectiveness of PRM

systems. The findings from this manuscript suggest that the capabilities of PRM systems and partnership governance mechanisms do not always reinforce each other. The performance implications of PRM systems are not straightforward and, therefore, PRM systems must be specifically tailored to each client in order to maximize performance. Managers should take away from this study that PRM systems are often quite complex and should not be thought of a “one size fits all” type of technology.

“Manufacturer–reseller e-business arrangements: The impact of inequity on relationship performance and the moderating role of dependence,” by Talai Osmonbekov and Thomas Gruen, investigates the role of perceived inequity when a manufacturer introduces an e-business tool to a reseller. In this article, the authors discuss how e-business arrangements may change the nature of channel relationships by inducing feelings of perceived inequity between manufacturers and resellers. In essence, resellers may feel that newly introduced technologies may benefit the manufacturer more than themselves, thus increasing feelings of perceived inequity. Two technology-based antecedents of perceived inequity are explored from the reseller perspective. The impact of perceived inequity on relationship performance and the moderating role of reseller dependence are also investigated. The results of the empirical test suggest that relationship performance is negatively impacted when the reseller shows higher levels of perceived inequity. However, the moderating impact of reseller dependence suggests that a highly dependent reseller is less likely to let perceived inequity impact relationship performance. For manufacturers, these findings highlight the “hidden threats” that accompany the introduction of new e-business tools while offering a few suggestions for overcoming these threats.

Daekwan Kim, S. Tamer Cavusgil and Erin Cavusgil address the issue of aligning information technologies across the supply chain in their contribution, “Does IT alignment between supply chain partners enhance responsiveness and customer value creation? An empirical investigation.” The authors explore the roles of IT alignment and strategic collaboration across the supply chain on relationship-enabled responsiveness and customer value creation. In the study, IT alignment refers to the level of integration of technology platforms between major supply chain partners whereas strategic collaboration considers the quantity of strategic decision-making that occurs across partners. In order to study these relationships, a survey of 184 supply chain management professionals was conducted. The authors find that as interfirm alignment increases, supply chain responsiveness improves, thus leading to improved levels of perceived customer value. In sum, this study emphasizes that new technologies are most effective at creating customer value when that technology is properly aligned with a firm’s supply chain partners.

Finally, Ellen Thomas contributes to this special issue with her article entitled, “Supplier integration in new product development: Computer mediated communication, knowledge exchange and buyer performance.” This study investigates the role of differing communication channels between buyers and suppliers as they collaborate on developing new products. 157 R&D project managers operating in manufacturing were asked about their use of email, video conferencing, web-based channels, and face-to-face meetings during open innovation projects. Email and face-to-face communications were found to have the strongest impact on knowledge exchange, thus leading to more efficient and effective NPD performance and, ultimately, superior market performance. Interestingly, video conferencing and web-based tools were found to be inferior communication channels during joint NPD projects. Managers should take away from this study that while email technology is quite useful, other, more-advanced technologies may not be appropriate during interfirm projects.

3.2. *The role of the buyer–supplier relationship on technology acceptance*

The second section of this special issue includes two manuscripts that analyze the role of the buyer–supplier relationship in

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