Mapping network champion behavior in B2B electronic venturing
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Abstract

This study examines the concept of a new venture, B2B e-market in the light of participants who are involved in its innovation and diffusion processes. Our assessment results in the development of two key working propositions. The first proposition attempts to explain the relationship of the participants in the network and their contribution to innovation and diffusion processes over time. The second proposition attempts to explain how network champions (NC) contribute by bringing suppliers and buyers together in an electronic marketplace over time. In particular, this research adds to the industrial marketing literature by applying a case research method that is particularly useful for operationalizing theory development in business-to-business environments.

Keywords: Mapping; Business-to-business; Network champion; Networks; Relationships

1. Introduction

The main focus of this paper is the mapping of the behavior of participants in the diffusion process associated with the creation of start-up firms in business-to-business e-markets. In so doing, the paper demonstrates how working propositions derived from literature can be refined using case data in order to develop theory.

The growth in the adoption of B2B e-markets has been revolutionary in the last decade, in particular in industrial markets (Kaplan & Sawhney, 2000; Mahadevan, 2003; Sharma, 2002). As the concept of such start-up firms is new and focuses on process related activities, a longitudinal mapping of activities has dominated this work. In general, limited research exists on the role of the participants in the diffusion process in networks (Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000) and mapping how networks evolve over time is the first step in the progression towards its understanding (Madhavan, Koka, & Prescott, 1998).

Rogers (1995) claim that, in process research, data gathering and analysis, seek to determine the time-ordered sequence of events. This is in contrast to variance research where data gathering and analysis consist of determining the co-variance among a set of variables, but not their time-ordering as a sequence. Further, Rogers (1995) claims that most diffusion research is a variance-type investigation that uses highly structured data gathering and quantitative analysis of static data. Consequently, a variance research method cannot probe backward in time in order to understand how the process evolves from its inception to its final launch or who in the network influences the process. Research in this area of B2B e-marketing is important simply because of projected growth. For example, both the Boston Consulting Group and the Forrester Group predict trillion dollar revenues for e-market businesses by 2004 (Kafka, 2000), a prediction supported by the academic literature (Evans & King, 1999).
This report begins by providing a background to the research, following which it develops a conceptual framework identifying a number of working propositions from the literature. It then focuses on operationalizing these working propositions based on scholarly work by Huff, Narapareddy, and Fletcher (1990) and Nath and Newell (1998). The data set is unique as it follows the evolution of a network of organizations from the pre-birth stage to the launch stage.

2. Background

New firms or industries emerge when individual entrepreneurs and innovators discover a new technology that provides a superior product platform to that provided by existing technologies (Schumpeter, 1932). In a process of creative destruction, a new product development (NPD) based on the superior technology can not only replace the prior dominant product forms but may also lead to the replacement of existing firms in the industry (cf. Tellis & Golder, 2002). Unlike price competition, where firms compete by attempting to offer standardized products at lower and lower prices, in creative destruction, firms compete by searching out new markets with new products, lower and lower prices, in creative destruction, firms based on the superior technology can not only replace the prior dominant product forms but may also lead to the replacement of existing firms in the industry (von Hippel, 1986). Lead users are defined as those who “face needs that will be general in a marketplace but face them months or years before the bulk of that marketplace encounters them and are positioned to benefit significantly by obtaining a solution to those needs” (von Hippel, 1986). In contrast to von Hippel (von Hippel, 1986), Biemans (1989) claims that third party participants are the drivers of innovation. In addition to lead users and third parties, this study invokes the concept of the network champion (NC) (see Woodside, 1994).

As the internet creates network communities which share news and expertise, the activities of the participants become important (Sharma, 2002). In particular, the role of champions in NPD has been a topic of discussion since 1963 (Schon, 1963). Network champions arguably have a profound positive impact on the NPD process, yet empirical support for this broad proposition is limited (Markham, 1998). The concept of champion is documented in the product innovation management literature where a product innovation champion is defined as an individual who is spirited, almost independent and fully capable and willing to pursue the risk of creating a new venture (Calish & Gamache, 1984). Further, Burgelman’s (1983) case study on innovation reveals that champions influence top management’s acceptance of a project by making apparent the strategic importance of such projects.

In the new venture creation process, a number of champions are involved. They include new venture champions, network champions, product champions, and organizational champions. For the purpose of this study, the new venture creation champions (NVCC) are those who are directly involved with the creation of the new venture at a management and entrepreneurial level.

The concept of NC extends work on the product champion concept (Burgelman, 1983; Maidique & Zirger,
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