



Anatomy of a social partnership: A stakeholder perspective

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ABSTRACT

We offer an anatomic analysis of a social partnership among a complex network of stakeholder organizations. Contributions of this research are twofold. First, we use explanatory case data to develop a framework of stakeholder collaboration in a complex setting involving a mix of for-profit and non-profit organizations. Our study is motivated by a need for understanding about how organizations can work within social partnerships to achieve their goals (be they profit related or otherwise). Second, we offer insight about lateral relationship exchange from the view of the entire project—a perspective not typically employed in the domain of relationship marketing. The focal issue in the case, use of technology to improve highway safety, is a social initiative which further sets our study apart in the relationship marketing literature. Using fieldnotes from 33 in-depth interviews, we employ a mix of inductive and deductive reasoning to formulate a conceptual framework and research propositions for the social partnership. The conceptual framework offers in-depth understanding of social partnership development and relationship dynamics. This, in turn, may help stakeholders achieve organizational goals more effectively in this unique environment.

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1. Introduction

Most of the greatest innovations in history are those that emerged over a long period of time and required the involvement and adaptations of many business sectors as well as society. Counted among these multi-sector innovations are the telegraph, electricity and motor cars. In the last twenty five years, the internet, high-definition television, and recycling programs are among the many innovations that have had widespread impact on both business and the consuming public.

Integrating these innovations into mainstream use requires the involvement of many and varied partners from government agencies, non-profit organizations and commercial firms. For commercial firms, involvement in such partnerships can be a source of competitive advantage. Firms may find it profitable to be “first-movers;” they establish a competitive position with prohibitive barriers to entry for later entrants. Profitability may also be enhanced as firms gain new customers in new markets. Social benefits may accrue as well; these are important as they may translate into significant goodwill on the balance sheet. Yet, although these complex innovations have enormous implications for the nature and practice of relationship marketing, our theoretical models fail to adequately capture the full range of issues and relationships in such situations.

To address this gap in the literature, we draw on stakeholder theory and relationship marketing literatures to advance the overarching perspective of a *social partnership* (Waddock, 1989, 2002) composed of non-profit organizations, government agencies, and for-profit companies. Social partnerships are unique as a relational form in several ways. First, the unit of analysis is the collectivity of organizations that come together to solve “messy problems” that cannot typically be solved by one organization acting alone (Waddock, 2002). Even though individual organizations have separate (often conflicting) goals, the focus is on the collectivity, not on any individual organization. Second, social partnerships involve a wide range of relationships—some growing into formal contractual relationships and others coming and going in less formal ways over time (i.e., social contracts between stakeholders). A third distinguishing factor is the “social” component of the partnership. Thus, the project goal cannot be achieved without the interactions and collaboration within the collectivity of organizations—and it is the nature and process of those interactions that are of interest in the social partnership perspective. Finally, the cross-sector collaboration presents far-reaching implications throughout industry supply chains. New technologies and/or whole industries emerge and firms in the commercial sector create new products for new markets.

As an illustrative example, consider how the advent of “green” and environmentally-friendly products involves the collaboration of organizations across public and private sectors to develop new technologies for the benefit of society. These organizations include investors, suppliers, legislators, government agencies, environmentalists, retailers, the media, special interest groups, and local, state, and

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federal governments, among others (see Mendelson & Polonsky, 1995; Polonsky, 1995; Stafford & Hartman, 1996). Previous research approaches might consider a particular company and how the company might build relationships within the “green” world to its advantage.

For instance, the shoe/clothing retailer, Timberland, offers a new line of shoes called the Earthkeepers Collection where parts of the shoe (sole, lining) are made from recycled material. Timberland's goals include profit and corporate social responsibility. On the other hand, a social partnership perspective considers more broadly issues such as how recycled materials are sourced and processed, the equipment and systems needed to recycle the materials, how incentives may encourage companies like Timberland, the use of public service programs to encourage citizens to recycle, and so forth. Thus, Timberland is a commercial firm that is getting involved as one participant in the social partnership that is focusing on the use of recycled materials in apparel manufacturing. Similar examples include the development of biotechnology products, satellite cable TV, and the introduction of the electric car (see Cooper, 2000).

We believe the concept of social partnerships well characterizes the various multi-sector innovations that have changed the way we live and work, as well as those, that are currently emerging. Our research uses a case study approach to examine the formation and functioning of one social partnership focusing on one multi-sector innovation. The case is a specific context in which a broad group of stakeholders work together in an attempt to deploy an “Intelligent Transportation System” (ITS) project in one mid-sized city. Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) is a multi-sector innovation involving a set of technologies and applications focused on improving roadway transportation and public safety. When fully deployed and operational, an ITS project relies on a wide variety of technological and management systems to provide a well-coordinated response to any unplanned roadway event (including traffic congestion, crashes, spills of hazardous materials, and so on). The goals of an ITS project are to identify adverse roadway events, send the appropriate response (ambulance, tow trucks), quickly transport victims, rapidly clear the roadway, and finally to restore the traffic to normal patterns with minimal impact on the traveling public.

The objectives of this research are to identify and describe a relatively under-researched form of lateral relational exchange—a social partnership. We first examine the foundations in the literature, define the concept of social partnerships, and highlight the fact that social partnerships, as a form of relational exchange is a valuable, yet under-researched approach. We next provided additional background for the research context in order to give the reader an understanding of the nature of the products and services that are of interest to the business sector. We then describe the methodologies used to collect and analyze the case data. A conceptual framework is presented based on a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. Finally, we explore

the research and managerial implications of the framework, note the limitations of this research, and suggest next steps to further develop the understanding and usefulness of social partnerships from a marketing perspective.

2. Foundations in the literature

Both the marketing and management literatures have put forth a variety of concepts and frameworks in an effort to deepen our understanding of the growing complexity of the markets in which today's companies compete. In this section, we offer a representative (non-comprehensive) view of research in relationship marketing, social partnerships, and stakeholder theory that has addressed relationship forms (i.e., structure) among organizations. As a way to organize and summarize, we point to the typology shown in Table 1.

In particular, we distinguish between inter-organizational relationships involving for-profit firms only versus relationships that involve both for-profit and non-profit organizations. According to Voss, Cable, and Voss (2000), the distinction between for-profit and non-profit organizations is significant. They note that “whereas for-profit firms pursue financial goals associated with revenue or profit maximization, non-profit ... firms may pursue non-pecuniary goals that are supported by a diverse set of external constituents, including local, state, and federal government agencies ...” (p. 330). Relationship types are further examined in Table 1 with regard to economic scope, structure, interdependence, and relationship outcomes. The table also identifies representative research for the various relationship forms.

2.1. Relationship marketing

Leading theoretical perspectives of relationship marketing are contextually bound to the for-profit realm (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003; Coviello, Brodie, Danaher, & Johnston, 2002; Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006). Participants in relationship marketing studies are variously identified across studies as customers, suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, buyers, sellers, stakeholders, etc. Cannon and Perrault (1999) provide an empirically derived taxonomy of relationships between buyers and sellers—both of which are motivated by profit goals and objectives. They identify relationship types ranging from simple, transaction-oriented exchanges to more collaborative exchanges. In an empirical study, Wilson and Vlosky (1997) compared and contrasted transaction-oriented relationships and partnering-oriented relationships between buyer and seller dyads. Such relationships, while relatively complex, tend to be well-defined, focused around organizational goals, with relationship participants having a relatively low level of interdependence.

Ross and Robertson (2007) recently expanded on relationship types typically studied in the literature to describe compound relationships between firms. Through examples they describe how a

Table 1
Selective overview of research on relationship types and considerations in the marketing literature.

Relationship composition	Relationship range	Manifestations	Representative research	Economic scope	Relationship structure	Focal issue	Interdependence of organizations	Relationship outcome
For-profit firms only	Between firms	Typical transactional and partnering	Cannon and Perrault (1999), Wilson and Vlosky (1997)	One sector	Tight, established	Inter-firm goals	Low	Defined profit and/or sales goals
	Among firms	Networks, strategic alliances	Turnbull et al. (1996) Ross and Robertson (2007)	One or two sectors				
Mix of profit and non-profit organizations	Between organizations	Public-private partnerships	Welch and Wilkinson (2002)	Limited sectors	Loose, emerging	Societal problems	Moderate	Somewhat defined business and societal goals
	Among organizations	Social partnerships	Present research	Multiple sectors			High	Unclear, uncertain, ill-defined business and societal goals

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