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The effects of trust and interdependence on relationship commitment: A trans-Atlantic study

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Abstract

In recent years, interorganizational relationship management has become of paramount interest in marketing channels research. Marketing managers and researchers have identified mutual commitment among exchange partners in a marketing channel as central to successful relationship marketing and as key to producing significant benefits for firms. We consider two types of commitment that may characterize interfirm relationships. Affective commitment expresses the extent to which channel members *like* to maintain their relationship with specific partners. Calculative commitment measures the degree to which channel members experience the *need* to maintain a relationship. After conceptualizing commitment, we offer a set of hypotheses concerning the joint impact of trust and interdependence on both affective and calculative commitment. Testing our hypotheses in a field study involving two countries, we find strong evidence that total interdependence enhances both affective and calculative commitment. Which type of commitment develops depends on trust. The unexpected positive effect of interdependence asymmetry on affective commitment seems to be in line with a stream of research that has emphasized the positive role of power differences in promoting the effective coordination of channel relationships.

Keywords: Marketing channels; Commitment; Trust; Interdependence; Cross-national

1. Introduction

Relationship commitment has recently emerged in the marketing channels literature as a critically important element for channel survival (e.g., Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and per-

formance (Kumar et al., 1994; Noordewier et al., 1990). Channel member commitment connotes solidarity and cohesion (Dwyer et al., 1987), encouraging the channel partner firms to resist apparently attractive short-term alternatives in favor of the expected long-term benefits of staying with existing partners (Anderson et al., 1994; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

The recognition that commitment is central to successful relationship marketing has triggered re-

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search on the factors that contribute to developing, maintaining and increasing commitment. Recent studies suggest that both structural elements of the channel relationship and channel firm attitudes can impact relationship commitment. We focus on one structural element, the channel interdependence structure, and one attitudinal factor, trust in one's channel partner, that have been identified as having an impact on commitment. Whereas considerable evidence indicates that trust positively affects commitment (Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), the effects of channel firm interdependence on commitment are less clear, in part because different researchers have examined different aspects of channel firm dependence or interdependence.

In this paper, we argue that the effects of trust and interdependence on relationship commitment are more complex than revealed by previous findings. First, although recent social science research has found commitment to be a multi-faceted construct (e.g., Allen and Meyer, 1991; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990), channel studies have almost exclusively focused on a more affective kind of commitment, neglecting a second, more instrumental type of commitment, viz. calculative commitment. Recognition of this second type of commitment generates the possibility that trust and interdependence could have different impacts on affective commitment versus calculative commitment. Secondly, we propose that trust and interdependence will have an interactive effect on affective commitment. Finally, marketing theories frequently have been tested only in a single country, often the United States. It is not clear to what extent research findings and insights obtained in one particular country are applicable to other countries. As Cunningham and Green (1984), (p. 9) pointedly observe: "This is essentially a question of external validity and research should be encouraged to determine which marketing principles can be universally applied and which are basically ethnocentric". Therefore, we test the cross-national validity of our hypotheses with data from two countries, the United States and the Netherlands.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we discuss the construct of commitment, distinguishing between affective and calculative commitment. Next, we develop hypotheses about the impact of the channel interdependence structure and trust on commit-

ment. Then, we describe the research methodology and test our hypotheses on data collected from automobile dealers in the United States and the Netherlands. Finally, we discuss the limitations of our research and the implications of our findings.

2. The nature of commitment – affective commitment and calculative commitment

Commitment typically has been defined as a channel member's intention to continue the relationship (e.g., Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Dwyer et al., 1987). Organizational researchers have noted, however, that several different motivations can underlie this intention, and thus have identified various different types of commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1991). Of these, affective commitment and calculative commitment appear most frequently and also seem to be the most relevant for interorganizational relationships (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). Both affective and calculative commitment are psychological states, i.e., relatively stable attitudes and beliefs about the relationship that arise, at least in part, out of interaction (Huston and Robins, 1982), but they clearly arise from different *motivations* for maintaining a relationship.

Past channel studies, however, have usually focused solely on affectively motivated commitment (e.g., Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Kumar et al., 1995a; Kumar et al., 1995b; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) where the underlying motive to maintain a channel relationship is a "generalized sense of positive regard for, and attachment to, the organization" (Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991, p. 699). According to this view, an affectively committed channel member *desires* to continue its relationship because it likes the partner and enjoys the partnership (Buchanan, 1974). It experiences a sense of loyalty and belongingness (Jaros et al., 1993; Porter et al., 1974).

Calculative commitment, in contrast, is the extent to which channel members perceive the *need* to maintain a relationship given the significant anticipated termination or switching costs associated with leaving. It results from a 'cold' calculation of costs and benefits, including an assessment of the investments made in the relationship and the availability of

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