



Reseller adoption of manufacturers' e-business tools: The impact of social enforcement, technology–relationship fit and the mediating role of reseller benefits

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ABSTRACT

Manufacturer–reseller relationships are increasingly becoming technology-infused as distribution managers are employing e-business tools to streamline existing channels. This research examines the role of social enforcement, relationship–technology fit and the perceived reseller benefits in reseller adoption of manufacturers' e-business tools. The results of the empirical test involving a sample of 224 resellers suggest that social enforcement and technology–relationship factors impact reseller e-business adoption, while reseller benefits play a mediating role. Implications of these findings for researchers and managers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

When Renault wanted to share information with its network of more than 14,000 dealers in Europe they turned to Oracle's Siebel brand of Partner Relationship Management (PRM) software. Using this web-based software Renault was able to streamline its communications with dealerships, improve dealer sales lead-conversion rates by 30% for new cars and by 25% for used cars, and become more responsive to customer requests via web-site by following through with emails to dealers in the customer's area. In addition, Renault was able to provide the dealerships with automated self-service 24/7 technical support for dealers, and standardize business processes across its dealer network (Oracle, 2007). As this example illustrates, manufacturer–reseller relationships are undergoing a dramatic transformation as manufacturers attempt to capitalize on the proliferation of web-based business software, commonly referred to as e-business tools (Wu et al., 2002). The proliferation of similar web-based software packages has been surveyed in previous research (Lee et al., 2005; Bello et al., 2002; Mirani et al., 2001). These studies suggest that information exchange between channel members may be becoming more sophisticated than e-mail and less expensive than traditional Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) systems. While the PRM benefits to manufacturers are well understood, there is little understanding on what drives the adoption of PRM and related tools by the downstream channel partners.

Extant marketing research examines various antecedents of e-business adoption by a firm. For example, Srinivasan et al. (2002) study technological opportunism, institutional pressures and ownership of complementary assets and Wu et al. (2002) examine firm characteristics, customer power and normative pressures. However, e-business adoption has not been studied in the channel context, nor have supplier relationship variables been posited to influence e-business adoption by a firm. For instance, in the Wu et al. (2002) study only half an item is devoted to the influence of suppliers on the e-business adoption by a firm. The relational context in which the firms make e-business adoption decisions is very important, as e-business tools are becoming a de-facto interorganizational information sharing, communication and payment system in the channels of distribution. O'Callaghan et al. (1992, p. 45), in the context of EDI systems, note: "Interorganizational systems employing information technology may be the most important technological breakthrough in channels of distribution since air transport." Given the superiority of e-business tools to traditional EDI in terms of cost, flexibility and openness, the dearth of empirical research on e-business in the channels context is surprising. Additionally, there are no previous marketing studies on e-business adoption that examine the mediating role of a firm's perceived benefits from technology, although information science literature paradigms suggest that technology usefulness is one of the primary drivers of adoption in an organizational setting (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

This research attempts to contribute to the emerging literature on e-business technology (Srinivasan et al., 2002; Wu et al., 2002) by extending the governance theory (Heide, 1994; Heide and John, 1992) into the domain of technology adoption in buyer–seller relationships. The study develops and tests a theoretical model by drawing from

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marketing and information science literatures as well as insights gained from in-depth interviews with managers at reseller firms. First, the study examines e-business adoption in the channel context by incorporating social enforcement and relationship–technology fit as important factors contributing to reseller adoption of manufacturer's e-business tools. Second, it develops measures for reseller e-business adoption in demand and supply activities as well as reseller sales force and ordering benefits. Third, drawing from information science literature, the study explores the mediating role of reseller benefits, which has not been studied in marketing literature.

2. e-business adoption by resellers

For the purposes of this research, e-business adoption is defined as the extent to which a reseller uses e-business tools on a manufacturer's web site in its interactions with that manufacturer. Demand activities are intended to stimulate orders for the manufacturer's products. They cover promotions that are often performed by both reseller and manufacturer and thus constitute a relationship connector between them. Another such connector is activities intended to ensure adequate supply of manufacturer's products to end users. These supply-fulfillment activities include logistical and supply management activities. This fundamental separation between activities has been reflected in the discussions of Supply Chain Management (SCM) and Demand Chain Management (DCM) concepts by Frohlich and Westbrook (2002) and Hekkila (2002), among others. SCM emphasizes total cost reduction or efficiency aspect in the interorganizational chain, whereas DCM focuses on the customer satisfaction and improvements in demand generation and monitoring. These activities can be handled using traditional methods (i.e. telephone, fax, mail, EDI), but e-business tools can potentially streamline both categories of channel activities (Frohlich and Westbrook, 2002).

One of the interesting aspects of e-business tools in the channel context is that it is a shared resource (Boyd and Spekman, 2004), because it is implemented and owned by a manufacturer but is also used by the channel members. Therefore, e-business tools are unlikely to create switching costs for resellers because they are not invested in those tools. Web-based tools reduce transactions costs, but are not likely to be viewed as a transaction specific investment that ties resellers to a particular manufacturer, as the tools could be used by any reseller. The only investment on the reseller side is the time and effort involved in learning to use the tools. However, our depth interviews with reseller managers revealed that this is not a particular concern for resellers because the tools are generally easy to use and similar across manufacturers. So, it is concluded that learning costs are negligible in this situation. Additionally, channel research generally views power-dependence relationships between channel members as an antecedent condition to the emergence of a particular type of governance (Heide, 1994). As discussed in the next section, the focus is on the bilateral governance process of social enforcement as a predictor of e-business adoption by resellers.

3. Theoretical model and hypotheses

The model is developed (Fig. 1) by combining insights from our depth interviews and examination of channels and information science research. The model reflects our thesis that resellers are more likely to adopt e-business tools if they perceive benefits for themselves and their perceptions of benefits are impacted by the

relationship with the manufacturer, both in terms of technology and the social enforcement of the relationship.

3.1. Social enforcement

Social enforcement is defined as the extent to which parties' shared expectations and norms serve as an enforcement mechanism in a manufacturer–reseller relationship. According to Heide (1994), firms may establish and share common values that direct their behaviors in a certain way. Such common values are often referred to as 'relational norms' (Heide and John, 1992) and may be indicative of bilateral governance in a relationship. Heide (1994) notes that market and bilateral means of enforcement may be similar as they "are designed to achieve compliance by means of making certain behaviors desirable or undesirable..." (p. 78). Social enforcement, as a bilateral means of enforcement, also could be described as self-enforcement because parties in the relationship are relying on existing social norms to guide their behavior.

Social enforcement may be a catalyst to reseller's adoption of the manufacturer's e-business tools, as they have shared expectations about improving and streamlining their business relationship. These shared norms guide reseller's adoption of manufacturer's e-business tools, as it is understood that it is a desirable type of behavior in this relationship. Additionally, if a reseller values its relationship with a manufacturer it is more willing to adopt manufacturer's new initiatives such as the roll out of manufacturer's e-business tools. Overall, if resellers think that they have a good working relationship with a manufacturer, evidenced by the existence of social enforcement, they are more likely to use e-business tools provided by that manufacturer. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a. Social enforcement is positively related to e-business adoption by reseller.

3.2. Relationship–technology fit

Manufacturer–reseller relationships may take various forms based on a variety of factors. For instance, Cannon and Perreault (1999) identify eight different types of business-to-business relationships based on six different relationship connectors. The universe of business-to-business relationships is diverse and complex with varying degrees of information exchange, operational linkages, legal bonds, cooperative norms and adaptations by the parties (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). In addition to Cannon and Perreault's (1999) classification, there are other classifications of business relationships (Heide, 1994; Dwyer et al., 1987). It would be too simplistic to assume that e-business tools in each of the different business relationships would operate similarly. Therefore, it is important to know how e-business tools fit into the existing manufacturer–reseller relationship.

Relationship–technology fit is defined as the extent to which the e-business tools are consistent with the current interactions between the organizations. Adapted from the concept of job fit (Speier and Venkatesh, 2002) and the compatibility factor in innovation diffusion literature (Rogers, 1995), this construct is designed to capture the interorganizational dynamics of using e-business tools by a reseller in its interactions with a manufacturer. Specifically, it is designed to measure the extent to which e-business tools fit into the existing pattern of interaction between the manufacturer and reseller. In the

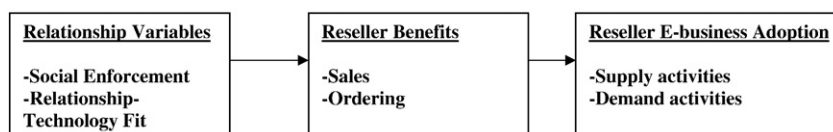


Fig. 1. Relationships variables, reseller benefits and e-business adoption.

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