



Applying a relationship marketing perspective to B2B trade fairs: The role of socialization episodes



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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the business-to-business (B2B) trade fair from a relationship marketing perspective. The main purpose is to comprehend buyer and seller interactions in the context of the trade fair, evaluating their impact on relationship quality and on the development of the relationship in the long-term. A research model is proposed with the underlying rationale that socialization episodes (i.e., social and information exchange) at B2B trade fairs are important catalysts for relationship quality and development. An empirical study was conducted to test the theoretical model. Data was collected at an international trade fair in Portugal and gathered information about visitor–exhibitor interactions. Findings reveal that the typical atmosphere of the B2B trade fair setting encourages socializing behaviors useful to generate bonds and commitment and, ultimately, enhances the relationship quality. Product importance moderates the relationship between information exchange and relationship quality, and relationship age moderates the relationship between social exchange and relationship quality. The study draws managerial implications for exhibitors, visitors and trade fair organizers and proposes avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

Relationship marketing encompasses the study of interactions, relationships and networks (Gummesson, 1994). Interactions, namely interaction episodes as referred to in the interaction approach, represent a fundamental level for understanding business relationships (Håkansson, 1982); being the management of the interaction process core to relationship marketing (Grönroos, 2004). The management of the interaction process is particularly relevant in industrial marketing and in B2B situations because firms establish buyer–seller relationships which are often characterized by being close, complex and long-term (Ford, 1980). The context in which the interaction occurs is also important because different contexts have a distinct influence on buyer–seller interactions and may enhance the effectiveness of the interaction process (Price & Arnould, 1999). In particular, interactions between buyers and sellers in the context of B2B trade fairs are relevant, as these events attract qualified and interested audiences available for interaction (Shipley, Egan, & Wong, 1993). Yet, despite the relevance of interaction episodes the study of the interaction dimension is not yet fully understood, in particular in the context of B2B trade fairs.

Previous research makes relevant contributions to the understanding of interaction episodes (e.g., Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Halinen, Salmi, & Havila, 1999; Holmlund, 2004; Ramani & Kumar, 2008). The interaction approach proposed four types of interaction episodes entailing financial exchange, product exchange, social exchange and information exchange (Håkansson, 1982). However, studying interaction is particularly difficult because interaction is a dynamic phenomenon and, therefore, hard to capture. Holmlund (2004) shed light on the conceptualization of interaction, by identifying different interaction levels clearly circumscribed in time and space, capable of being studied as entities of analysis. Such entities of interaction are modules of a relationship not yet fully covered in the literature (Holmlund, 2004). The relationship theory calls for an over-arching knowledge of interaction episodes' dynamics (Schurr, 2007), including the context where the interaction occurs.

Studies in business trade fairs have focused on different angles, such as, buying behavior and trade fair performance/benefits. By analyzing industrial buying behavior at trade fairs, Bello (1992) formulated a selling approach adapted to the unique trade fair environment. Borghini, Golfetto, and Rinallo (2006) investigated the nature of information search activities at trade fairs and found that trade fairs are amongst the most influential sources of information for industrial buyers. Under a performance perspective, the benefits of such encounters were considered to entail selling and non-selling categories (Bonoma, 1983), with executives evaluating more favorably the outcomes of the

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non-selling dimension (Kerin & Cron, 1987). Hansen (2004) proposed a scale capturing sales and behaviour-based dimensions of trade fair performance. Rinallo, Borghini, and Golfetto (2010) suggested that industrial marketers who employ experiential marketing techniques at trade fairs are likely to increase their trade fair performance. Yet, the investigation of trade fairs has been predominantly made from a transactional perspective, lacking the relational view (Geigenmüller, 2010) often challenged by the application of quantitative research (Bonoma, 1983). Additionally, the visitors' behavior and trade fair participation expectations have been overlooked (Gopalakrishna, Roster, & Sridhar, 2010).

The main purpose of this study is to comprehend buyer and seller interactions in the context of the trade fair focusing on the visitor's perspective. The research assesses the impact of interactions on relationship quality (i.e., the reliance and commitment to a relationship) and on the development of the relationship in the long-term. The study proposes the notion of socialization episodes as focusing on short-term relational exchange episodes (information exchange and social exchange). Adopting Holmlund's (2004) approach, we consider the buyer-seller interactions in the trade fair context as a sequence of interactions that has an impact at the upper interactions level, i.e., the relationship. Studying sequences of interaction as a meaningful entity of analysis is important since the parties make crucial evaluations after a given sequence of interactions is completed (Holmlund, 2004). Addressing the context where the interactions occur is also relevant as it may determine the way buyers and sellers act. In B2B trade fairs exhibitors and visitors are naturally more available for relational interactions. Consequently, adopting a relationship marketing perspective to trade fairs raises opportunities to exploit new benefits of participating in such events (Blythe, 2010; Geigenmüller, 2010; Hansen, 1999).

The contribution stemming from this research is twofold: first, to the relationship marketing literature for enhancing the understanding of the influence of a specific sequence of interactions in a particular context on relationship development; second, to further develop the literature on trade fairs beyond the transactional perspective, bringing in the context of the trade fair as relevant for buyer-seller interactions and relationship reinforcement. The empirical component of the research focuses on the visitor's interaction dynamics with the most important supplier (exhibitor) of an existing relationship. The data combines qualitative interviews with trade fair organizers, experts and trade fair attendees, and a survey administrated to visitors of an international trade fair held in Portugal.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we develop the theoretical background followed by the research hypotheses and the conceptual model. In the subsequent sections, the method is described and study findings are reported. Finally, we present the conclusions and derive research implications.

2. Background

2.1. Business relationships and interactions

Relationships are more generalized and long-term in nature while interactions are short-term, and comprised of actions associated with exchange and adaptation between firms (Johanson & Mattson, 1987). Markets are knowingly dynamic (Paliwoda, 2011) and interaction episodes represent a fundamental level of theory for understanding business relationships (Schurr, 2007). Important interactions involve social exchange (Schurr, Hedaa, & Geersbro, 2008), as economic action is embedded in structures of social relations in modern industrial society (Granovetter, 1985). The social component of relationships facilitates the economic exchange and often compensates for imperfect legal contracts (Macneil, 1980).

The interaction model (Håkansson, 1982) presents four main groups of variables that describe and influence the interaction: (i) variables related to the process of interaction; (ii) variables characterizing the

parties involved; (iii) variables describing the environment; and (iv) variables related to the atmosphere affecting and affected by the interaction. The interaction approach not only involves an analysis of these groups of variables but also the relationships among them. According to the interaction approach the buyer/seller relationship comprises both short-term and long-term processes. Short-term interactions are labelled episodes and comprise the variables related to the process of interaction referring to: product exchange, financial exchange, social exchange and information exchange (Håkansson, 1982).

The use of two aggregation levels of interaction, that is, short-term episodes and long-term processes provides an incomplete and limited analytical depth (Holmlund, 2004). Holmlund (2004) proposes a categorization into five levels of relational interactions: action, episode, sequence, relationship and partner base. Such conceptualization helps to set clear boundaries for studying interactions, being useful for analytical purposes. Thus, the interaction phenomena are dynamic processes circumscribed in time and space. The interpretation and evaluation of the outcome in each level of analysis is determinant for the next level, and the evaluation of a specific sequence of interaction might, for instance, impact on the evaluation of the relationship as a whole. Such view may be linked to the idea that relationships change over time and different stages represent a major transition in how parties regard one another. For example, the relationship may be on the pre-relationship stage, the early stage, the development stage, the long-term stage and the final stage (Ford, 1980) or in the awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution stages (Dwyer et al., 1987). The underlying reasoning is that throughout the stages of relationship development there is an evolution on the parties' experience, commitment and adaptation to the relationship (Ford, 1980).

2.2. A relationship marketing approach to trade fairs

A trade fair has been defined as a "facilitating marketing event in the form of an exposition, fair, exhibition or mart; which takes place at periodically recurring intervals (...) whose primary objective is to disseminate information about, and display the goods and services of competing and complementary sellers (...), clustered within a particular building(s), or bounded grounds; and whose audience is a selected concentration of customers, potential buyers, decision influencers, and middlemen" (Banting & Blenkhorn, 1974, pp. 286/287). Trade fairs are widely regarded as a powerful way for firms to reach a large number of potential customers face-to-face at a lower cost than that of salespeople calls (Blythe, 2000). They also represent a unique opportunity for sellers to contact with promising buyers who are voluntarily examining product offers. Trade fairs bring the customer to the company resulting in a high concentration of potentially interested customers and presenting unique opportunities to the firm (Godar & O'Connor, 2001; Gopalakrishna & Williams, 1992).

Trade fairs have a broader role than making sales (Bonoma, 1983; Cavanaugh, 1976; Rinallo et al., 2010). From a relational perspective, they represent an important context for interaction and a relevant instrument for relationship marketing (Blythe, 2002; Rice, 1992). Trade fairs are often an opportunity to grow social bonds with key actors in the market (Rinallo et al., 2010) and to develop and maintain/strengthen long-term relationships (Godar & O'Connor, 2001). Information and social exchange are particularly important in such context (Hansen, 1999; Rice, 1992), as trade fairs facilitate strategic networking and increase sales opportunities (Tanner, Chonko, & Ponzurick, 2001). There is evidence of the influence that trade fairs have among relationship learning activities and their impact on relationship performance (Li, 2006). From the visitors' perspective, this learning experience is key, both at the individual and organization levels (Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995). In this sense, trade fairs are "learning expeditions that engage industrial buyers' creative thinking towards the solving of work related problems" (Rinallo et al., 2010, p. 253).

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