



An impact-oriented implementation approach in business marketing research

Introduction to the Special Issue on “Implementing Strategies and Theories of B2B Marketing and Sales Management”



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ABSTRACT

There are serious concerns about the theory–practice gap in the research on business marketing. One of the key aspects is the relevance and implementability of the results. The overarching objective of this special issue of “From Strategy Frameworks to Value-in-use: Implementing Strategies and Theories of B2B Marketing and Sales Management” is to enhance understanding of managerial implementation. We have four goals in this introductory article. First, we discuss implementation as a concept, given the varying views and the considerable ambiguity. Second, we identify and analyze aspects that influence the potential for carrying out managerially relevant research and challenge the implementation process. As a result we propose an implementation framework for use in our third task: to introduce the articles in this special issue. We conclude by presenting an agenda for enhancing the managerial relevance of future business-marketing research.

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“There is an alarming and growing gap between the interests, standards, and priorities of academic marketers and the needs of marketing executives operating in an ambiguous, uncertain, fast-changing, and complex marketplace.”

[(Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009)]

1. Introduction

Marketing is a paradoxical discipline; it is simultaneously seen as overtly empirically driven and wanting in advanced theory construction (Möller, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2010; Yadav, 2010), and is criticized for lacking in practical implementation and thus being poor in managerial relevance (Gummesson, 2002; Piercy, 2002). This kind of tension is typical in most applied fields; there are always scholars who pursue new knowledge for its own sake and researchers who want to excel in producing relatively rapidly implementable results. However, in spite of calls to combine scientific “rigor” and

managerial or social “relevance” (Brennan, 2004; Varadarajan, 2003), and efforts to develop joint research agendas among academics and practitioners (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010), there are serious concerns that the theory–practice gap is actually growing wider (Reibstein et al., 2009). This is alarming given that without at least long-term implementability business-marketing research – and researchers – will lose their credibility.

The overarching goal of this special issue of “Implementing Strategies and Theories of B2B Marketing and Sales Management” in *Industrial Marketing Management* is to respond to the need for information on managerial implementation, thereby enhancing the relevance of research on business marketing, and especially sales management, which has been rising in prominence (LaPlaca, 2013). We are sincerely grateful to Peter LaPlaca, the Editor-in-Chief of the IMM, for his invaluable support in producing this special issue. We have four goals in this introductory article. First, we aim to shed light on the concept of implementation, and to ease the confusion and ambiguity that surround it. Second, we identify and analyze aspects that influence the potential for carrying out managerially relevant research and challenge the implementation process. We use the resulting framework in our third task: to introduce the articles comprising this special issue. Finally, we draw up an agenda for enhancing the managerial relevance of business marketing in the future. The paper proceeds in accordance with the above-mentioned goals.

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2. The many facets of implementation

2.1. Implementation in marketing research

What do we mean when we speak of implementation in marketing research? Let us give a brief historical review. The significance of implementation as a determinant of successful management research was highlighted in the 1980s. This interest was based on the strong expansion of strategic planning in the 1970s. Numerous large corporations invested in headquarter-led strategizing and corporation- and business-group-level schemes, inviting researchers to participate in and evaluate them (Buzzell, 2004). Companies with explicit implementation programs enjoyed better results from their planning efforts (Barney, 1991; Buzzell & Gale, 1987).

The key message was that marketing strategies only resulted in superior returns when they were implemented successfully (Bonoma, 1984). This led to the first wave of literature questioning the balance between theorizing, marketing models and planning, and implementation, and there were calls for more attention to managerial relevance and execution (e.g., Bonoma, 1984; Bonoma & Crittenden, 1988). From the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s researchers became increasingly interested in the inability of the marketing function to execute, and especially evaluate the performance of various marketing investments, ranging from advertising effectiveness to new product development and organizational change (Webster, 1981). The high investments required called for better tools for improving the implementation and pre-analyzing the potential performance effects of alternative marketing plans and activities (Lilien & Kotler, 1983).

Failed marketing implementation was used as an example of strategic weakness in execution. This development resulted in a few articles theorizing marketing implementation and providing guidelines (see especially Noble & Mokwa, 1999; Noble, 1999), but unfortunately these remained isolated efforts.

By the early 2000s the focus of academic marketing had progressed to establishing a quantitative understanding of the fit between business strategy, marketing strategy, and dimensions of market orientation and performance, with relatively little consideration of actual implementation (Thorpe & Morgan, 2007; Vorhies & Morgan, 2003). This trend, driven by the overwhelming success of the market-orientation school, later marketing strategy, and enabled by the dominant role of SEM methodology, did not generally produce managerially interesting results. The derived propositions tended to be too general, based mainly on extensive cross-industry samples, or too self-evident or abstract (Piercy, 2002). A good exemplar and synthesis of this research orientation is provided by Slater, Hult, and Olson (2010), who address the factors influencing the relative importance of creativity in drawing up a marketing strategy and effectiveness in its implementation. On the other hand, there was increasing evidence that corporate success was strongly associated with an ability to execute flawlessly (Joyce, Nohria, & Roberson, 2003).

2.2. Business marketing and implementation

Although the research on business marketing shares many of the briefly sketched features of studies on marketing strategy and corporate performance, it offers a considerably richer insight into marketing implementation (Woodside, Pattinson, and Montgomery (2012b) give an excellent overview of implementation in business marketing). Managerial interest is represented in the business-marketing themes listed below (the list is by no means exhaustive, and the themes have been chosen to suit the purposes of this special issue; for a description of dominant research topics in business marketing see LaPlaca, 2013; Pels, Möller, & Saren, 2009):

- Customer relationship management (CRM) systems and their implementation

- Key account management (KAM) systems and their implementation
- The marketing and selling of complex systems – “systems business and project business”
- Relational selling programs and practices
- Value-based selling

The selected themes represent programmatically constructed solutions for the management of business customer relationships, and especially sales. There are a number of relevant differences in terms of managerial implementation, however. We briefly discuss the first three research domains, the last two being addressed in the articles comprising this special issue.

Customer relationship management emerged in the mid-1980s, driven by rapidly developing information technology. Primarily constituting practice-based and consultant-driven activities and tools for managing customer relationships through databases and direct-marketing activities, CRM quickly attracted academic attention as an integral part of the emerging relationship-marketing orientation (Boulding, Staelin, Ehret, & Johnston, 2005). Helped by the Internet and mobile technology, marketers found additional opportunities to customize their offerings and messages (Kumar, Ramani, & Bohling, 2004).

Two interrelated but distinctive views are discernible in research on the implementation of CRM programs and practices. In its simpler form CRM is regarded as a tool set for optimizing a firm's customer equity and the customer's lifetime value through customer relationships and portfolio management (Malthouse & Blattberg, 2005). The managerial goals are to enhance marketing efficiency by the better targeting of marketing activities, especially communications, and to achieve high levels of customer retention and market share (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004). It was soon recognized, however, that the effective implementation of CRM involved not only tools and related capabilities, but also inter-functional cooperation and the adoption of a customer-oriented or relationship-marketing-driven culture (Boulding et al., 2005; Gummesson, 1998). Bohling et al. (2006), for example, suggest that the effective implementation of CRM presumes coordination in the management of the product portfolio, customers and promotion, operations, and accounting systems. We suggest that an in-depth understanding of this complex process requires case or action research and the adoption of a multi-disciplinary perspective.

Key account management (KAM) has its origins in the 1970s when large US companies such as IBM and Xerox started to refer to their major national-level customers as key accounts, and to offer them dedicated sales persons and teams. Academics became interested in this marketing innovation in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Stevenson and Page (1979), Stevenson (1980), and Shapiro and Moriarty (1982) investigated issues related to the adoption and implementation of key account practices. Since then various aspects of KAM adoption and execution have been examined in numerous studies that also offer suggestions on its implementation (see e.g., Abratt & Kelly, 2002; Ivens & Pardo, 2008). Following the early emphasis on selling practices the more recent interest has focused on the relationship-marketing aspects of KAM, and on organizational issues in the globalizing economy (Wengler, Ehret, & Saab, 2006).

In spite of these considerable research efforts, current understanding of the successful implementation of KAM is still relatively limited. There are several reasons for this. Adopting KAM is a complex organizational and cultural process that is sensitive to the business field and company-level factors. As a result, recommendations based on cross-sectional studies tend to be too general and ‘mean-based’ to have significant managerial value. Given their strategic, international, and organizational dimensions, major KAM programs such as CRM would benefit from multidisciplinary research approaches (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010). Homburg, Workman, and Jensen's (2002) configurational study represents a significant attempt to examine the variation in real-life KAM applications: the authors identified eight

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