



Interpersonal attraction in buyer–supplier relationships: A cyclical model rooted in social psychology

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ABSTRACT

The concept of attraction is not reserved for the study of interpersonal relationships between husband and wife, family members, or lifelong friends. On the contrary, it contains much potential as a variable describing interpersonal business exchange relationships. This potential has been noted by well-known industrial marketing scholars in the past, and recent theoretical advances have incorporated attraction to describe buyer–supplier exchange, although primarily at the *interorganizational* level of analysis. The in-depth understanding of interpersonal attraction between boundary spanners representing buying and supply companies has yet to be developed. By drawing on social psychology and social exchange literature, this paper attempts to fill some of this gap. It contributes by uncovering the elements and process of interpersonal attraction. Furthermore, propositions are formulated to guide future research efforts on interpersonal attraction in the buyer–supplier context. Finally, the managerial value and challenges of applying attraction to buyer–supplier exchange relationships are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Attraction (or attractiveness) has appeared occasionally in the literature on industrial buyer–supplier relationships for the past 5 decades. However, before the most recent decade, the interest was limited to either incorporating it as one construct of many in larger-scale conceptualizations of business interaction and exchange (e.g. Bagozzi, 1974; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Frazier, 1983; Grönroos, 2000; Halinen, 1996) or as a secondary variable in various types of marketing exchange models (e.g. Bonoma & Johnston, 1978; Campbell, Graham, Jolibert, & Meissner, 1988; Evans, 1963). Hence, the importance of the construct was established, but the amount of writings and in-depth inquiries on attraction were still limited. Recently this has changed, as attention has been building, with a particular surge in the purchasing oriented part of the literature. Two primary factors have driven this change: 1) the wish for extending the current understanding of close ties in buyer–supplier relationships, whose importance is by now established in the field, and 2) the realization that the ability of companies to mobilize supplier resources by being attractive customers is paramount to not just purchasing performance, but indeed competitive advantage. This latter idea is more novel in purchasing than marketing, where researchers have been occupied with the objective of attracting customers for some time. However, in the purchasing field, the notion of offering rewards and being attractive to suppliers to gain access to resources is novel, not the least because it represents a reversal of

traditional market logic (Schiele, Veldman, & Hüttinger, 2011b). Research in this stream has framed constructs such as customer attractiveness (Ellegaard, Johansen, & Drejer, 2003; Hald, Cordon, & Vollmann, 2009), supplier satisfaction (Essig & Amann, 2009; Ghijssen, Semeijn, & Ernstson, 2010), supplying behavior (Ramsay & Wagner, 2009), competence marketing (Golfetto & Gibbert, 2006), and preferred customer (Schiele et al., 2011b).

As noted by Schiele, Veldman, and Hüttinger (2011a), the majority of research on the topic has been on the meso level, concerned with interorganizational attractiveness between buying and supplying companies, while little research has dealt with the interpersonal level. Consequently, these authors call for more research on the micro level. While research on the meso level is crucial to understanding how companies can improve their ability to mobilize exchange partner companies, it is also clear that social micro processes of attraction occur at the inter-personal level, between boundary spanners that represent their organizations, and that these processes are equally important (Caballero & Resnik, 1986). Hence, the purpose of this paper is to extend current understanding of attraction at the interpersonal level in order to evaluate why and how this construct should be brought to use in studies of buyer–supplier relationships. It contributes not only to the growing literature on attraction in business exchange, but also to the literature on close ties between buyers and suppliers and customer/supplier relationship management. From a practical angle, companies are experiencing remarkable challenges on these accounts. Boundary spanning managers need to understand how they can improve their attractiveness, not the least relative to suppliers, as well as how they can establish close ties with exchange partners in general.

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To meet the article objectives, the social psychology literature and its small but influential branch social exchange, are applied. Research on industrial buyer–supplier relationships has a long tradition of drawing on social psychology/exchange to understand business exchange (e.g. Bagozzi, 1974, 1975; Bonoma & Johnston, 1978; Dwyer et al., 1987; Frazier, 1983; Håkansson, 1982; Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman, 2001; Wilson, 1995). The social psychological theoretical foundation for attraction was established between 1950 and 1980 and more recent research has provided few radical developments but primarily theoretical refinements and testing. As agents representing their organization, boundary spanners from each side of the buyer–supplier interface interact socially and elicit behaviors that generate costs and rewards for each other (Bagozzi, 1974). This social interaction has a large impact on the interorganizational level business exchange. Social psychology, which is the primary field of research on interpersonal interaction, is therefore applicable to explain organizational phenomena (Michela, 1996; Staw, 2002). In a buyer–supplier context, Bonoma and Johnston (1978, p. 215) found that “the major factors influencing the purchasing decision are social ones, not rational-economic ones”. As one of the most central concepts to describe the social interaction process in both these literatures (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Blau, 1964; Duck, 1977; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), attraction also has merit in the study of economic exchange relations. Bonoma and Johnston (1978, p. 217) noted that “*cooperation, trust, and mutual liking are variables that can develop in a positive interaction between buyers and sellers*”, liking being virtually synonymous with attraction in the social psychology literature (Duck, 1977; Levinger & Snoek, 1972). Indeed, attraction has been recognized as a valid construct and study object in industrial marketing and purchasing research (Bagozzi, 1974; Bonoma & Johnston, 1978; Caballero & Resnik, 1986; Dwyer et al., 1987; Hald et al., 2009; Halinen, 1996; Harris, O'Malley, & Patterson, 2003; Ramsay & Wagner, 2009; Schiele et al., 2011b).

Interpersonal attraction is relevant to all buyer–supplier relationships that hold some level of interpersonal interaction. However, this article focuses on buyer–supplier exchanges with a certain level of interdependence, mutual importance, stability, and desired continuity, where the development and maintenance of attraction are somewhat complex and difficult. Moreover, the article focuses primarily on the process of developing these buyer–supplier relationships into what Levinger and Snoek (1972) calls close mutual relationships, where the parties influence each other's actions and attitudes to a large extent. Parties in a close relationship have “*frequent, strong, and diverse impacts on each other over a long period*” (Clark & Pataki, 1995, p. 305). The increase in intensity, outcomes, and managerial complexity occurring when developing into the close range makes this type of relationship particularly interesting from a business exchange perspective. Close relationships hold most of the potential for business innovation and development, unlike surface contact relationships, which are characterized by mainly bilateral attitudes and limited interaction and interdependence, and which are only capable of supporting basic exchange (Levinger & Snoek, 1972). It appears though, that the surface contact relationship has been the dominant mode in buyer–supplier relationships in many companies, for various reasons. Developing close, collaborative relationships is evidently a considerable challenge (Spekman & Carraway, 2006), and perhaps the adoption and analysis of attraction as a relevant business exchange concept can increase our understanding of this challenge.

The contributions of the article are: 1) an improved understanding of the different types of rewards and costs arising in interpersonal exchange between buying and selling boundary spanners, 2) a cyclical process model of attraction in interpersonal exchange, and 3) an agenda for extending knowledge on interpersonal attraction in business exchange through future empirical investigations. The paper is structured as follows. First, studies of interpersonal attraction in buyer–supplier relationships are reviewed and the basics of attraction are explained. Second, two large theoretical sections discuss the antecedents of attraction

and the conditions and outcomes of attraction. This leads to a discussion of future research opportunities presented in the form of researchable propositions. Finally, managerial implications are provided and a conclusion is drawn.

2. Attraction in the literature on buyer–supplier relationships

The idea of attracting attention from customers and suppliers, making them prioritize the company instead of competitors, has appeared occasionally in the literature on buyer–supplier relationships. The concept of reverse marketing follows such a line of reasoning as it reverses traditional buyer and supplier roles (Leenders & Blenkhorn, 1988). Suppliers are attracted through assertive communication, persuasion, and the buying agent taking initiative to develop close collaboration aimed at improving outputs from the exchange (Blenkhorn & Banting, 1991; Leenders & Blenkhorn, 1988). While reverse marketing focuses on the interactive involvement and engagement with suppliers, Christiansen and Maltz (2002) investigate buying company characteristics, with an emphasis on the programs and value propositions companies apply to become interesting business partners for their suppliers, especially in a context of low bargaining power relative to suppliers. More recently, Schiele et al. (2011b) have framed the construct preferred customer, denoting a certain status in the supplier's customer resource allocation system, which buying companies can achieve, thereby benefitting from supplier resources for advanced value creation, e.g. innovation. Other authors focus on what buying companies can do to access and mobilize supplier resources by generating supplier satisfaction (Essig & Amann, 2009; Ghijzen et al., 2010) or by understanding and satisfying supplier needs, wants and preferences (Ramsay & Wagner, 2009). Pardo, Missirilian, Portier, and Salle (2011) find that many of the barriers to customer attraction are to be found in the buying company, for instance because value co-creation with suppliers is ill-understood among purchasing employees. Finally, the considerable bodies of research on supplier development and early supplier involvement have cultivated similar ideas over the years. Supplier development studies have looked into the types of direct involvement and supplier incentives offered by buying companies to suppliers, mainly with the aim of process development, and indicated customer attractiveness as a major precondition for supplier development (Galt & Dale, 1991; Krause & Scannell, 2002). A similar agenda has been followed in research on early supplier involvement, also based on the idea of customer attractiveness as a necessary condition, but with a primary focus on gaining access to supplier resources for product development (Handfield, Ragatz, Petersen, & Monczka, 1999; Schiele, 2010).

While the purchasing literature has tended to emphasize the interorganizational level of attraction, the marketing literature has gone some of the way toward uncovering the interpersonal level. Bagozzi's (1974, 1975) seminal work on marketing as exchange incorporates attraction as a secondary construct. Inspired by social exchange theory, particularly Blau and Homans, he develops a model of exchange, which includes attraction. He also briefly discusses the social exchange of rewards between the buying and selling person, defined by their fulfillment of personal needs. Another well-known seminal framework that incorporates attraction has been proposed by Dwyer et al. (1987), who adopt the framework of social psychologist Scanzoni (1979) in describing the development process of buyer–seller relationships. The authors (p. 14) contend that “*research analyzing the interpersonal attraction and the interdependence relationship between husband and wives provides an apt framework for describing the evolution of buyer–seller relations*”. Like Bagozzi, they only discuss attraction briefly, as one of several variables in the overall model. Moreover, they emphasize attraction merely in the initial stage of relationships. But they add some additional detail on types of rewards, noting that the characteristics of the other person in business exchange may be the reward in itself and that attitude or attribute similarity may be an important antecedent. The importance of similarity is mirrored in more recent

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