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Beyond the Dyad: Electronic Commerce and Network Perspectives in Industrial Marketing Management

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To date, industrial marketing has built its conceptual frameworks upon the concept of a dyad—a relationship between one buyer and one seller. Thus, much of what has been researched in business-to-business marketing uses the buyer–seller relationship as the most appropriate unit of analysis. Yet, today,

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the most exciting development in business marketing is electronic commerce, which is a technology and a paradigm not of dyads but of networks. A great deal of the buyer–seller relationship between firms is being replaced or significantly transformed by electronic commerce systems. Networks pose a tremendous problem in measurement. Existing business metrics were designed for a world of concrete boundaries and fixed categories—a world that is slipping away day by day. Governments will have a keen interest in the development of metrics,

In e-commerce, two is too few.

as they struggle with regulation of these new entities. As boundaries between organizations blur, governments will have more trouble defining the entity that they are attempting to regulate. In the information economy, perhaps governments will recognize the essential role of “co-opetition” as an essential business strategy. For the dyad, we have the metaphor of marriage. For bureaucratic organizations, we have the metaphor of an army. What is the “similar” organization that will deliver insights about managing within a network? Perhaps the closest metaphor may be a migrating flock of birds. Thus, managers and researchers who want to understand the emerging face of technology-enabled business must come to grips with network concepts and their implications. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

To date, industrial marketing has built its conceptual frameworks upon the concept of a dyad—a relationship between one buyer and one seller. Thus, much of what has been researched in business-to-business marketing takes the buyer–seller relationship as the most appropriate unit of analysis. Recognizing the dyad meant recognizing the importance of the relationship and the variables that characterize it. Variables examined under the dyadic paradigm have included such phenomena as trust, commitment, and power. Yet, today, the most exciting development in business marketing is electronic com-

merce (e-commerce), which is a technology and a paradigm not of dyads but of networks. A great deal of the buyer–seller relationship between firms is being replaced or significantly transformed by e-commerce systems. These systems include ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) on the back end and CRM (Customer Relationship Management) on the front end of a company’s supply chain. Thus, managers and researchers who want to understand the emerging face of technology-enabled business must come to grips with network concepts and their implications (see Table 1).

Drawing from its origin in economics, marketing originally focused on the individual firm and the individual transaction. In the second half of the twentieth century, drawing in part on the sociology of marriage, marketing came to recognize the dyad—two people interacting over time. Two people were then broadened to two groups, with the introduction of the “buying center” and “selling center” concepts. In the emerging world of e-commerce, however, two is too few. More and more, managers will find themselves working within a network—a group of actors loosely and temporarily bound by the interplay of competence and opportunity.

The conceptual transition from dyad to network promises to be even more difficult than the previous evolution from a transactional focus to one of relationship marketing. Relationship marketing spoke to managers about a world they understood—a world of meetings and other exchanges with representatives of partner firms, people who became

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TABLE 1
Table of Dyadic/e-Commerce Viewpoints

Dyadic Viewpoint	e-Commerce Viewpoint
Dyads	Networks
Legacy systems	e-Commerce
Person-to-person	Virtual interface
Information search process	Intelligence sharing
Negotiation of price	Fixed long-term pricing
Project driven	Process driven
Competitive	Co-opetitive
Firm profitability	Customer value analysis
Transactions and relationships	Enterprise partnering

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