Industrial Marketing Management 63 (2017) 145–157

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management

Understanding the sales-marketing interface dysfunction experience in business-to-business firms: A matter of perspective

Avinash Malshe Ph.D. [a,*], Jeff S. Johnson Ph.D. [b], Paul Viio Ph.D. [c,d]

[a] Opus College of Business, University of St Thomas, 1000 LaSalle Ave, Mail # TMH 443, Minneapolis, MN 55403, United States
[b] Department of Marketing and Supply Chain Management, Henry W. Bloch School of Management, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5110 Cherry Street, Room 334B, Kansas City, MO 64110, United States
[c] Aalto University, School of Business, Department of Marketing, PO Box 21230, FIN-00076 Aalto, Finland
[d] Hanken School of Economics, Department of Marketing, CERS – Centre for Relationship Marketing and Service Management, PO Box 479, FIN-00101 Helsinki, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 27 April 2016
Received in revised form 17 October 2016
Accepted 20 October 2016
Available online 23 October 2016

Keywords:
Sales-marketing interface
Dysfunction experience
Sensemaking
Qualitative

ABSTRACT

Despite its importance, the sales-marketing interface (SMI) in business-to-business (B2B) firms is often dysfunctional. While scholars have proposed functional-level impactors of SMIs, research that examines how sales and marketing personnel, at an individual level, perceive, evaluate, and respond to SMI dysfunction is sparse. Our study employs a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach and uses in-depth interview data collected from 42 participants in 21 sales-marketing dyads across multiple levels from a variety of B2B industries to examine this phenomenon. Findings reveal that the same dysfunction may trigger vastly different sensemaking processes in sales and marketing personnel's minds wherein they sense and interpret the same dysfunction encounter differently. These interpretations lead them to resort to activities that may, at times, be counterproductive to resolving the dysfunction. In addition, sales and marketing personnel view the interface dysfunctions as following a bidirectional pattern, as opposed to a sequential pattern that has been documented in the literature. Collectively, differential dysfunction experiences within the SMI have implications for whether and to what extent the dysfunction is addressed.

1. Introduction

To function efficaciously, firms must engage in myriad interfaces internally (e.g. between departments) and externally (e.g. with customers). Of the interfaces occurring within the organization, the interface between sales and marketing has been identified by scholars as one of the most critical ones since sales and marketing have a pivotal role in organizations' successful interactions with business customers (Malshe, 2011; Malshe & Sohi, 2009a; Rouzies et al., 2005). Accordingly, understanding how to optimize functionality of the sales-marketing interface (SMI) in B2B firms is of paramount importance to academics and practitioners alike.

Constructive interaction between marketing and sales can lead to desirable outcomes such as better strategies in the marketplace (Malshe & Sohi, 2009a), superior customer value (Guenzi, Pardo, & Georges, 2007), and enhanced organizational performance (Rouzies et al., 2005). However, in many B2B firms, SMIs are plagued by deeper-level problems such as misaligned systems, processes, and compensation plans, as well as sub-optimal organizational structures (Malshe & Biemans, 2014). These problems, in turn, may give rise to interface dysfunctions such as lack of communication or collaboration, or sometime overt conflict between sales and marketing personnel, which may individually, or collectively, impede firms' ability to achieve the desirable strategic outcomes noted above (Beverland, Steel, & Dapiran, 2006; Kotler, Rackham, & Krishnaswamy, 2006; Montgomery & Webster, 1997). Furthermore, these dysfunctions can compound upon each other exacerbating problems within the SMI. Specifically, poor communication quality and lack of bidirectionality in communication can engender dysfunctional conflict (Massey & Dawes, 2007), which, in turn, can have a strong negative impact on collaboration between sales and marketing in business to business firms (Le Meunier-FitzHugh, Massey, & Piercy, 2011).

The existing SMI literature considers how structural, systemic, cultural, and processual factors may address the SMI dysfunctions and harmonize it at a functional level (Rouzies et al., 2005). In this regard, many factors such as joint marketing and sales customer interaction, job rotation, personnel training, group orientation, structured meetings, information systems quality, company culture, and compensations have been proposed as impactors of the SMI in conceptual and qualitative SMI inquires (Guenzi & Troilo, 2006; Johnson & Boeing, 2016; Malshe & Sohi, 2009a; Paliwoda, Marinova, Biemans, & Makovec Brencic, 2007; Rouzies et al., 2005; Smith, Gopalakrishna, & Chatterjee, 2006).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: amalshe@stthomas.edu (A. Malshe), johnsonjs@umkc.edu (J.S. Johnson), paul.viio@hanken.fi, paul.viio@aalto.fi (P. Viio).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2016.10.014
0019-8501/

Additionally, quantitative research in the SMI domain has tested several factors impacting the efficacy of the SMI such as communication frequency, organizational justice, reward structure, senior management support, marketing information systems, communication technology, and informal interaction opportunities (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014; Dawes & Massey, 2005; Hulland, Nenkov, & Barclay, 2011; Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Lane, 2009; Le Meunier-Fitzhugh & Piercy, 2009; Le Meunier-FitzHugh et al., 2011).

While advancing understanding of these functional-level impactors has unarguably contributed to knowledge germane to the SMI, theoretical insights that will provide understanding of how individual-level variables impact the functioning of the SMIs are needed. Interface dysfunctions such as the lack of communication or collaboration, or overt conflict are a lived experience for sales and marketing personnel. When the SMI is dysfunctional, it is the sales and marketing personnel who (a) have to confront it, (b) are deeply impacted by it, and (c) have to navigate the roadblocks the dysfunction creates in their day-to-day work. It is plausible that sales and marketing personnel, owing to the many differences between them in terms of their worldviews and perspectives (Homburg & Jensen, 2007) as well as their personalities, motivations, drive, orientation and domains of competence (Biemans, Makovec Brencic, & Malshe, 2010) may experience the same interface dysfunction differently – that is, they may perceive, interpret, and respond to the same interface dysfunction in a dissimilar manner. Further, their likely differential dysfunction experience may plausibly shape their perspectives about how these dysfunctions are interrelated.

Thus, scholarly inquiry that explores sales and marketing personnel's interface dysfunction experience at an individual level, and further understands how they view the interrelationships among these dysfunctions is likely to not only generate new theoretical insights but also shed greater light on how sales and marketing personnel may be equipped to tackle the interface dysfunctions (Malshe & Sohi, 2009b).

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the following research questions:

(a) What makes SMI dysfunctions salient to sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms?
(b) How do sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms interpret SMI dysfunctions?
(c) How do sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms respond to SMI dysfunctions?
(d) How do sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms perceive the interrelationship among SMI dysfunctions?

Since there is a lack of prior research that would elucidate in a nuanced manner how the sales and marketing personnel experience interface dysfunctions at an individual level, we utilize a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach (e.g. Challagalla, Murtha, & Jaworski, 2014; Zaltman, LeMasters, & Heffring, 1982) and use data collected from 42 informants made up of 21 marketing and sales dyads from within 17 B2B firms to study this phenomenon.

Our findings provide novel insights to SMI research by illustrating how marketers and salespeople experience pervasive SMI dysfunctions. Three interface dysfunctions emerged consistently in our inductive data analysis: communication paucity, lack of collaboration, and interface conflict. We find that the same interface dysfunction may trigger substantially dissimilar sensemaking processes for sales and marketing personnel. Specifically, their individual perceptions of each dysfunction, as well as their interpretations in terms of the situational and existential meanings they ascribe to the dysfunction (what the dysfunction tells them about their role in the immediate and global situation respectively) are markedly different. Consequently, sales and marketing personnel respond differently when experiencing the same SMI dysfunction, and many times, their responses are counterproductive in that they contribute to the dysfunction festering over time.

Our informants' perspectives further indicate that the interface dysfunctions do not follow a specific sequence with communication paucity preceding and giving rise to conflict and sub-optimal collaboration. On the contrary, our data insights suggest that the timing and/or sequence of the dysfunction's occurrence may follow a bidirectional and/or a circular pattern.

In the following section, we discuss our methodology followed by the study findings. Consistent with the theories-in-use approach, we then situate our findings within the existing body of work on SMI in the Discussion to offer theoretical advancements. We also highlight how the study's findings can guide managerial practice, as well as note study limitations and espouse future research directions.

2. Method

To identify and understand the various dysfunctions that may manifest in the SMI, a qualitative, discovery-oriented methodology was employed. Qualitative research concentrates on the perceptions of decision-makers and is useful in generating a rich understanding of complex phenomena through participants' perspectives and voices (Creswell, 2007). Given the espoused complexity and paucity of research in the SMI domain around how dysfunction manifests and is experienced by individuals living with these dysfunctions, a qualitative approach fits the research need well. Specifically, we conducted multi-firm qualitative inquiry using a theories-in-use approach (Challagalla et al., 2014; Zaltman et al., 1982). As Zaltman et al. (1982, p. 98) note, a theories-in-use approach is ideal for the purpose of "generating concepts, propositions, and theories by observing multiple subjects of cases where theories are in apparent use." A theories-in-use approach is a useful means of gaining multifaceted insight germane to a complex phenomenon consistent with our research objectives. We strived to accumulate a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and narratives on the topics under consideration from sales and marketing personnel from multiple companies within a variety of B2B industries. Our approach is similar to other investigations in the marketing literature using a theories-in-use approach (Challagalla et al., 2014; Friend & Malshe, 2016).

2.1. Sample and data collection

Consistent with the tenets of a theories-in-use approach, we used theoretical sampling in this study. This sampling technique requires the researcher to go to places, people, or events that will maximize the opportunities to identify variations among the concepts under investigation and help densify themes in terms of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 201). Accordingly, we sampled from firms of all sizes across multiple B2B industries to accumulate a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and narratives on the topics under consideration (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 215).

We used the following three criteria to ensure that we spoke with the most appropriate individuals within the sampled companies: (a) the informant had at least two years of experience in their current company, (b) their companies had distinct sales and marketing departments, and (c) they had an existing working relationship with their sales or marketing counterpart. Since we wanted to explore the likely differential interface dysfunction experience of sales and marketing personnel, we collected dyadic data. A dyad consists of a sales and marketing person from within the same company at the same hierarchical level. Eight dyads in our sample represent the bottom level, ten dyads represent the middle level, and three dyads represent the top level of the organizational hierarchy in their respective companies. We ascertained the informant's level based on their job responsibilities, who they reported to in their company, and whether or not they had direct reports. Our final sample consists of 42 informants (21 dyads) from 17 different B2B companies across 10 industries. Table 1 provides the detail for each informant.