

The determinants of the quality of the sales-marketing interface in a multinational customer brand focused company: the Latin American branches

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Abstract

Customer evolution and changes in consumers, determine the fact that the quality of the interface between marketing and sales may represent a true competitive advantage for the firm.

Building on multidimensional theoretical and empirical models developed in Europe and on social network analysis, the organizational interface between the marketing and sales departments of a multinational high-growth company with operations in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay is studied.

Both, attitudinal and social network measures of information exchange are used to make operational the nature and quality of the interface and its impact on performance.

Results show the existence of a positive relationship of formalization, joint planning, teamwork, trust and information transfer on interface quality, as well as a positive relationship between interface quality and business performance.

We conclude that efficient design and organizational management of the exchange network are essential for the successful performance of consumer goods companies that seek to develop distinctive capabilities to adapt to markets that experience vertiginous changes.

Keywords: Marketing organization, sales organization, marketing-sales interface, consumer packaged goods industry, Latin America

INTRODUCTION

This paper studies the factors which influence the quality of marketing and sales departments' interface and its effect on business performance within the context of a post-crisis Latin American market, characterized by profound changes in consumers, competitors and clients.

Homburg and Jensen (2007), use the term "quality of cooperation" between marketing and sales (instead of "integration"), defined as the extension where there is systematic collaboration between marketing and sales, characterized by a unity of efforts.

Rouziès et al. (2005) define the marketing and sales interface as a dynamic process by which two functional areas create more value for the firm by working together than they would if they worked separately. However, considering the criticisms made to and the ambiguity of the term "integration" (Homburg and Jensen 2007), the terms "quality of marketing-sales interface" will be used herein.

While extensive research has been conducted on interdepartmental relations between Marketing and Production, Research and Development, Finance and Logistics, research on the interface between the marketing and sales function has only been done recently (Homburg et al. 2008) particularly in terms of its impact on business performance (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2007).

The theoretical and empirical literature that has treated marketing and sales as separate units has either considered typologies of the interface and the management issues related to different stages within the organization (Webster 1997; Day and Montgomery 1999; Kotler et al. 2006; Homburg et al. 2008) or examined the integrative mechanisms and their relationship with business performance (Dewsnap and Jobber 2000; Dewsnap et al. 2004; Rouziès et al. 2005). From a theoretical point of view these integration mechanisms can be examined considering structure, processes or systems, culture and people.

Homburg, Jensen and Krohmer (2008) have carried out one of the most recent and comprehensive empirical study which develops a taxonomy of interfaces, creating a multidimensional model which integrates simultaneously dimensions which had previously been studied as isolated elements: power (Homburg, Workman and Krohmer 1999), shared information and integrative mechanisms (Cespedes 1995), cognitive orientation and knowledge (Cespedes 1995; Montgomery and Webster 1997). The above mentioned multidimensional model studies those five domains and identifies superior configurations called "Brand-focused Professionals" (consumer goods companies with differentiated marketing and sales functions), characterized by top quality collaboration systems and market performance.

The present study performs, to our knowledge for the first time in the literature, an empirical analysis of the above mentioned model within one of the most effective configurations in terms of interface quality, the "Brand Focused Professional" companies, and examines the factors affecting the marketing and sales interface and the network information exchange dynamics.

It tests the model in a multinational packaged consumer goods company, operating in the Latin America's Southern Cone, with a record of outstanding performance and a global recognition for its excellence in execution, extending the original model with a relational or social network component.

Up till now, the marketing and sales interface has not been considered from a relational view point and barely considered in the social network literature (Betts and Stouder 2004), although this approach has been used to analyze supply chain interfaces (Carter et al. 2007).

A network is a set of actors who are connected with one another through arches which carry out transactions. Mutual profitability is only possible if resources are joined (coordination) and the parties agree to give up the right to follow their own interests at the expense of general interests (collaboration). Networks include three critical components: knowledge, trust (cooperation and reciprocity of a long term continuous exchange relationship), speed and the ability to disseminate new information (Powell 1990; Wasserman and Faust 2008).

To understand economic exchange, "embeddedness" is a key concept in network theory (Granovetter, 1985), which implies that every economic behavior is necessarily embedded in a larger social context and the results are affected by dyadic relationships between actors and the relationship network structure. Relational "embeddedness" is the dimensional extension of relationship quality (centrality and power) and it is an indicator of how actors connect with each other and how much influence they exert on economic performance (Uzzi 1996). Structural "embeddedness" is an analytical concept which examines how resource or information flow is organized in terms of structure within the structure of ties between actors (density). Considering findings resulting from research on other interfaces, particularly supply chain management (Carter et al. 2007; Borgatti and Li 2009) and the configuration of Japanese "keiretsu" networks (Wakabayashi 2003), we examine how marketing and sales can develop relational trust, fostering cooperation and coordination (Rodríguez and Wilson 1999), limiting opportunistic behavior and reducing transaction costs (Uzzi 1997).

The network approach then, provides a natural conceptual complement and a way to make operational some of the concepts developed in Rouziès et al. (2005) framework and Homburg et al. (2008) model.

THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS

Our model includes two sets of relationships. The first set of relationships describes the effects of network variables on trust and performance, analyzing network variables such as density, centrality and power. Power is best understood from a network approach since it is inherently relational. If a system has low density, not much power can be exerted, while the opposite is true for high density systems. Network position (Bonacich 1991) is linked to the ability to absorb knowledge and loosen-up perspective, and at the same time it is related to intensive knowledge task performance which to a certain degree depend on the collection of proper information to solve new and challenging problems. According to the “embeddedness” approach on organizational control, trust enabled by relational proximity (Hess 2004), fosters the network learning process through a complex social phenomenon which includes knowledge, emotions, reputation, appearance, identities, institutions and power relationships (Glückler 2005).

In the case of the marketing and sales interface, trust is built upon social interactions, cultural integration between individuals with different “thought worlds” (Homburg and Jensen 2007) and the support of regulatory frameworks and institutional processes (Child and Faulkner 1998), that is to say, a combination of trust based on the institution and trust based on interaction.

Wakabayashi (2003) develops and proves empirically that a high number of relationships or ties (relational “embeddedness”) promote a positive assessment of relational trust (reciprocity) just as the density of the network (structural embeddedness) expands this effect (trust in skills and performance, reputation).

Rodríguez and Wilson (1999) prove that a high level of structural union determines a high level of trust in inter-company partnerships and Dawes and Massey (2006, 2007) indicate a positive relationship between trust and the perception of interface quality. Summarizing the above:

H1 Organizational trust is positively associated with a firm’s network: (a) density; (b) centrality; (c) power.

H2 Organizational trust is positively associated with the firm quality of marketing and sales interface

The second set of relationships is based on the multidimensional model developed empirically in Europe by Homburg and his colleagues (2008) which defines the dimensions affecting marketing and sales interface in the different taxonomies.

Knowledge and orientation differentiates these firms and establish them as consumer and customer experts respectively, while structural unions (teamwork) are integrative mechanisms (Workman et al. 1998). Summarizing the above:

H3 (a) Teamwork skills are positively associated with the firm’s quality of marketing and sales interface

H3 (b) Market and product knowledge of marketing and sales are positively associated with the firm’s quality of marketing and sales interface

Data dissemination and communication is a dimension described by Homburg et al. (2008) as a key factor to organizational learning (Kotler et al. 2006).

The hypothesis established by Rouziès and his colleagues (2005) shows the existence of a positive relationship between formal and informal communication and integration. In fact, bidirectional communication has a strong negative effect on conflict (Dawes and Massey 2005; Kotler et al. 2006). Summarizing the above:

H4 (a) Information sharing is positively associated with the firm’s quality of marketing and sales interface

H4 (b) Joint planning is positively associated with the firm’s quality of marketing and sales interface

H4 (c) Formalization is positively associated with the firm’s quality of marketing and sales interface

Power is another domain which reflects how the influence over market-related activities is divided amongst the marketing and sales functions (Homburg et al., 1999). In the organization under study marketing and sales department have equal weight, hierarchical level and participation in the Company Board. Within this structure, power is probably more dependent on exchange relationships, thus it is measured using the network approach (Hypothesis H1c).

Finally, there is empirical evidence that relates the quality of cooperation between the marketing and sales functions and business performance (Dewsnap et al. 2000, 2004, Rouziès et al. 2005; Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2007; Homburg et al. 2008). Summarizing the above:

H5 the firm’s quality of marketing and sales interface is positively associated with market business performance, achieving better competitive results.

COMPANY SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

The empirical study is conducted at a multinational consumer goods company in one of its Latin America's southern cone branches (Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay). The company has a worldwide presence and a large market share for participating categories.

In South America, the growth of the southern cone region stood out in 2006 (17%), 2007 (21%) and 2008 (26%), as one of highest growth rates in the world compared to other regions (America and the world 5-7%) affecting positively the market share performance in the most relevant categories where the firm occupies the first position with regard to its competitors.

According to the study conducted by Homburg and his colleagues (2008), the taxonomic group to which this type of consumer goods companies belong ("Brand-Focused Professionals") is characterized by the highest levels of formalization, joint planning, team work and shared information, as well as the highest levels of market and product knowledge. This industry has a strong strategic focus on brands, but also an intense development of the sales function (Homburg et al. 2000).

The research surveyed managers within both - sales and marketing departments - of the same firm in different countries, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, based on a data base supplied by the firm.

A self-administered questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument, and it was sent via e-mail to each of the people included in each country's data base. Every person contacted received an introduction on the project's objective, as well as an information confidentiality clause.

The questionnaire and its rating scales were based on literature review and were previously assessed through semi-structured qualitative interviews.

The questionnaire had 3 modules: characterization of the firm's respondent, marketing and sales network within work teams and the assessment of marketing and sales interaction within work teams.

In order to evaluate the network hypothesis, reciprocal information transfer relationships (who is information required from? Or, who goes in search of information?) were collected using a positional chart (Krackhardt 1990).

After quality control of the data, 43 valid answers were received out of a total of 75 from all three countries, over a period of less than 10 days, with similar quotas for marketing and sales. These cases represent a high rate 57% response (Homburg et al. 2007, 2008) and enough cases to enable the use of statistical analysis techniques (Mertler and Vannata 2005).

The marketing and sales responses came from a population with the same distribution (Z de Kolmogorov Smirnov's Non-Parametric Test) and non-significant differences (Non-parametric Test from the U of Mann-Whitney), all of which enabled us to unite all marketing and sales responses under one unique sample.

VARIABLES VALIDATION AND MEASUREMENT

Factor consistency evaluation was carried out in a first stage using Exploratory Factor Analysis (principal axis factoring for non-normal data, Costello and Osborne 2005).

Ordinal factor reliability was estimated applying SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) polychoric correlations (non-continuous ordinal data on the Likert scale) (Oliden and Zumbo 2008).

Business performance was assessed using 3 items. Informants were asked to indicate the extent to which the business unit's profit, growth and market share outcomes had occurred over the past year, based on 5-point scales (anchors: "1 = "Strongly disagree", 5 = "strongly agree") (Homburg and Jensen 2007; Homburg et al. 2008; Trade audits Nielsen/CCR).

All three items show low convergence ($\alpha = 0.76$). This result is due to the fact that the respondents are aware of the firm's growth and profitability but they don't have this information on competitors'. Considering high factor loading (> 0.6 , Costello and Osborne, 2005), the performance construct is substituted by the market share growth variable which is consistent with the marketing and sales managers' objectives and is verified through the Nielsen/CCR trade audits information (2008).

The quality of the interface was assessed using seven items (Ellinger 2000; Homburg and Jensen 2007; Homburg et al. 2008).

All seven items show high convergence ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Team working was assessed using six items (Cespedes 1996; Homburg et al. 2008). All six items show high convergence ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Information sharing was assessed using three items (Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Homburg et al. 2008). All three items show high convergence ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Formalization was assessed using seven items (Ruekert and Walker 1987; Dewsnap and Jobber 2002; Homburg et al. 2008), showing high convergence ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Joint planning was assessed using four items (Piercy 1989, Homburg et al. 2008), showing high convergence ($\alpha = 0.87$). Market and product knowledge was assessed using six items (Homburg et al. 2008), showing both low convergence (marketing knowledge $\alpha = 0.60$, sales knowledge $\alpha = 0.75$). Sales knowledge can be improved by eliminating the customer knowledge variable ($\alpha = 0.81$); however, due to the fact that it is an extremely relevant variable, this would not be feasible. Additionally, other indexes composed of the difference between marketing and sales knowledge were tested (Homburg and Jensen 2007), but convergence remained inferior to 0.8. This construct's weakness disables hypothesis validation or rejection.

Network variables are calculated considering the relationship between pairs of individuals who work in the marketing and sales functions (dyadics) in each country as units of analysis. For each pair, we measured the extension in which the individual in position i looks for and sends information on the individual in position j , using a matrix $N \times N$, (0.1). In order to reduce response accuracy problems, the reciprocal path was considered (giving and receiving information) and then the average was calculated (Borgatti et al. 2009).

Density (number of ties related to total possible network ties $[n(n-1)/2]$), centrality (biggest tie quantity, lowest distance, exposure index, strategic influence opportunity and leadership) and power (centrality negatively weighted with strong ties and positively weighted with weak ties) were calculated using Ucinet 6 software (Borgatti et al. 2002; Hanneman 2002).

Trust was assessed using three items (Wakabayashi 2003), showing high convergence ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Results confirmed the specialization in marketing and sales knowledge (>4 knowledge of clients through sales and knowledge of brands through marketing) as well as in team work, joint planning, mutual support, trust and performance, which are typical of "brand focused professional" firms and are consistent with the taxonomy defined by Homburg et al. (2008) and empirically validated in Europe.

The analysis of interface networks by country enables us to describe and understand information flow and allow us to make any necessary structural corrections. In the smaller countries, Uruguay and Paraguay, networks show high density levels close to their highest potential, and a high level of variation (Standard deviation close to 0.5). Higher density roles have a higher level of hierarchy and play an integrative role between the two departments (customer marketing).

In terms of centrality, actors within the Argentine network have more ties to other actors, and are therefore less dependent on other individuals since they have alternative ways of satisfying needs or obtaining more resources.

Centralization is low in all networks, displaying low heterogeneity. The most influential positions are once again those with a higher hierarchy level and they play a coordinating role between the two departments (customer marketing, visibility and trade category).

Once the concepts were made operational, we were able to test the relationship between them in the model, against the obtained measurement data, to determine how well the model fits the data.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) in order to understand the relationship between studied variables and latent variables which are the unobserved cause of the aforementioned ones.

In this study, SEM (Fox 2006) is applied using R software, a package that provides basic structural equation modeling facilities, including the ability to fit structural equations in observed variable models by two-stage least squares (assuming multinormality).

As a result we obtained a more strict analysis of the researched model, using the most common measures of fit: Chi-Square, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis, Bentler and Bentler-Bonnet (Tucker and Lewis 1973; Bentler and Bonnet 1980; Bentler 1990). Because different measures of fit capture different elements of the fit of the model, it is appropriate to report a selection of different fit measures.

Individual parameters of the model were examined using R package and polychoric correlations within the estimated model in order to see how well the proposed model fits the driving theory. Due to resulting non-convergence problems, structural equation models were estimated based on Pearson's correlation matrix (considering items as being continuous) given that parametric methods show the interaction between variables more strongly.

FINDINGS AND HYPOTHESES TESTING

The results obtained from software R enabled the validation of 6 out of the 8 hypotheses that had been originally posed. Hypotheses with a high and statistically significant structural coefficient (beta) and goodness-of-fit indicators close to 1, with an RMSEA close to 0,05, are validated.

As hypothesized, trust (β z value=4.8 Pr($>|z|$) 1,6e-06) has a significant and positive effect on interface quality (H2).

However, contrary to our expectations, other network variables, density, centrality and power (H1 a, b, c) have no significant effect on trust.

Knowledge construct either considered directly, squared (Tsui et al. 1992) or taken from difference index (Homburg and Jensen 2007), does not show any significant relationship with the quality of marketing and sales interface.

Although it is not possible to conclude that there is not any significant relationship between knowledge and interface quality, it is readily apparent that when a high level of knowledge specialization is attained, the interface will have developed integrative tools that minimize this effect (Workman 1993).

As hypothesized, teamwork (β z value=3.3 Pr(>|z|) 8.9869e-04), information sharing (β z value=3.1 Pr(>|z|) 2.5222e-03), formalization (β z value=2.9 Pr(>|z|) 3.9e-03) and joint planning (β z value=2.7 Pr(>|z|) 7.6684e-03) have a significant and positive effect on interface quality (H3a, H4a,b,c).

As hypothesized, quality of the interface (β z value=2.2 Pr(>|z|) 2.7528e-02), has a significant and positive effect on firm performance (H5).

CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study focuses on marketing and sales since these two functions play a key role in the company's performance.

Our findings suggest that the quality of the marketing and sales interface is positively associated with business performance, and is consistent with empirical evidence and previous studies (Dewsnap et al. 2000, 2004; Rouziès et al. 2005; Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2007; Homburg and Jensen 2007; Homburg et al. 2008) conducted in Europe. They also enhance the importance of interface management on the firm's successful achievement of goals in Latin America.

Our results also validate teamwork, information sharing, formalization, joint planning and quality of the interface dimensions, which have already been found to be relevant in the literature (Ruekert and Walker 1987; Piercy 1989; Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Cespedes 1996; Ellinger 2000; Dewsnap and Jobber 2004; Homburg and Jensen 2007; Homburg et al. 2007; Homburg et al. 2008) as dimensions playing a key role.

Additionally, information exchange network variables are examined, characterizing network density, power and centrality, validating the trust construct and its positive relationship with interface quality (Wakabayashi, 2003).

We believe that a significant contribution has been made to the existing literature, by combining two approaches which have not appeared simultaneously in any previous study: the multidimensional factor model related to the quality of interface and information exchange network approach variables.

Since our analysis rests on a small number of respondents (although they represent 60% of the sample) and limited to survey data provided by a firm operating in the consumer goods industry, the applicability of our findings to other industries needs to be tested. Additional studies, using better measures of knowledge (sales and marketing) would yield more insights. Future research could also examine other network variables and study the way in which different organizational network mechanisms operate according to different cultural norms and market mechanisms.

Despite these limitations, our study integrates the information exchange network approach to the marketing and sales interface management and validates models for Latin America, which have been previously tested in other continents.

Our findings suggest that the main challenge for senior executives in charge of managing the value of a social network interface is to make sure marketing and sales teams continue to improve the quality of interface, building trust and developing planning, information transfer and teamwork skills.

TABLES

Table 1: Descriptive statistics by construct

Construct	Variables	M	SD	Alpha Cronbach	Source
Relational Embeddedness	Centrality Argentina	14,2	4,7		Borgatti, Everett and Freeman (2002)
	Centrality Uruguay	12,2	3,0		
	Centrality Paraguay	11,0	2,1		
	Power Argentina	16,8	22,7		
	Power Uruguay	4,6	4,1		
	Power Paraguay	3,3	2,5		
Structural Embeddedness	Density (%) Argentina	42	0,49		
	Density (%) Uruguay	78	0,41		
	Density (%) Paraguay	75	0,43		
Trust	Mutual trust	3,91	0,84	0,85	Wakabayashi (2003)
	Long term mutual trust	4,05	0,79		
	Mutual support	4,33	0,71		
Knowledge of marketing	Knowledge of clients	2,77	0,81	0,60	Homburg et al. (2008)
	Knowledge of competitors	3,91	0,78		
	Knowledge of brands	4,44	0,63		
Knowledge of sales	Knowledge of clients	4,35	0,72	0,75	Homburg et al. (2008)
	Knowledge of competitors	3,95	0,62		
	Knowledge of brands	3,81	0,91		
Teamwork	Teamwork skills marketing	4,09	0,84	0,85	Cespedes (1996) Homburg et al. (2008)
	Teamwork skills sales	4,12	0,70		
	Communication skills marketing	3,91	0,90		
	Communication skills sales	3,88	0,66		
	Persuading skills marketing	3,74	0,66		
	Persuading skills sales	3,74	0,73		
	Conflict tolerance marketing	3,28	0,70		
Conflict tolerance sales	3,47	0,83			
Information Sharing	High speed information	3,55	0,80	0,94	Jaworski y Kohli (1993) Homburg et al. (2008)
	Proactive information	3,14	0,94		
	Relevant information	3,42	0,91		
Formalization	Process trust	3,88	0,70	0,85	Ruekert and Walker (1987) Dewsnap and Jobber (2002) Homburg et al. (2008)
	Written formalized process	3,81	0,73		
	Process development	3,40	0,70		
	Rules compliance	3,84	0,62		
	Rules effectiveness	3,77	0,61		
	Knowledge of process marketing	3,86	0,70		
	Knowledge of process sales	3,81	0,84		
Joint planning	Joint planning	4,05	0,49	0,87	Piercy (1989) Homburg et al. (2008)
	Joint decision	3,93	0,51		
	Joint implementation	3,67	0,68		
	Joint resolution	3,56	0,91		
Interface quality	Frictionless collaboration	3,56	0,91	0,91	Ellinger (2000) Homburg and Jensen (2007) Homburg et al. (2008)
	Coordinated decision	3,91	0,65		
	Coordinated activities	3,81	0,76		
	Common objectives	4,02	0,60		
	Agreements compliance by sales	3,88	0,73		
	Agreements compliance by mktg	3,74	0,66		
	Relationship satisfaction	3,91	0,90		
Business performance	Profitability result vs competitors	3,63	1,07	0,76	Homburg and Jensen (2007) Homburg et al. (2008) Trade audits (Nielsen, CCR)
	Turnover growth vs competitors	4,00	0,85		
	Market share vs competitors	3,65	0,95		

Table 2: Effects of network embeddedness, structural linkages, information and knowledge on Interface Quality and Business Performance

Construct effect	Null Model	Model							Hypotheses
	Chi-square	Chi-square	Beta Z value	Beta Pr(> z)	Goodness of fit	RMSEA	BB NFI	Tucker Lewis NNFI	
Network embeddedness	185,53	40,52	<2						H1 (a, b, c)
Trust	250,30	34,72	4,8	1,6e-06	0,874	0,074	0,861	0,957	H2
Teamwork	407,52	128,47	3,3	8,9e-04	0,749	0,137	0,685	0,775	H3a
Information	300,36	38,94	3,1	2,5e-03	0,874	0	0,870	1,000	H4a
Joint planning	284,30	46,42	2,7	7,7e-03	0,857	0	0,837	1,016	H4b
Formalization	385,91	89,68	2,9	3,9e-03	0,805	0,044	0,768	0,970	H4c
Interface quality	176,07	16,40	2,2	2,8e-02	0,925	0	0,907	1,081	H5

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