MARKETING-SALES INTERFACE AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS

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Summary

This paper focuses on the effectiveness of marketing-sales interfaces in B2B firms. As the body of knowledge on this domain is scarce, there is a greater need to investigate the specific aspects of marketing-sales configurations in such firms. The objective of this paper is to expand existing knowledge regarding marketing-sales interfaces in B2B firms, in order to identify the effectiveness of each configuration. Based on quantitative data collected from marketing or sales managers of 98 B2B firms, the study identifies the most effective marketing-sales interface in terms of smooth relationships and enhanced performance. The implications of the study are discussed.

Introduction

The relationship between Marketing and Sales (hereinafter M&S) units is receiving increasing attention (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000, 2002; Rouzies et al., 2005; Guenzi & Troilo, 2006; Homburg & Jensen, 2007; Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2007, 2011; Homburg, Jensen, & Krohmer, 2008; Hughes, Malshe & LeBon, 2012; Hulland, Nenkov & Barclay, 2012; Lionakis, Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2013). The literature highlights that M&S (a) are the customer centric team (Shapiro, 2002), (b) are both outward looking, focused on the customer and the market (Homburg et al. 2008), (c) are essential parts for the marketing activities in each company (Krohmer et al., 2002), and (d) have the overall common goal to offer superior customer value (Guenzi & Troilo, 2007; Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2011). Therefore, issues at the M-S interface are amongst the most important ones that managers are dealing with (Rouzies et al., 2005), as the working relationship of M&S plays a vital role in the organization (Kotler et al., 2006). In today's hyper-competitive world, the M&S functions must work together at every level, from the core central concepts of the strategy, to the minute details of execution (Shapiro, 2002). Nevertheless, in practice, the working relationship of M&S is often described as unsatisfactory and is characterized, mainly, by a lack of cohesion, distrust, dissatisfaction and conflict (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000, 2002).

Focusing on B2B firms, in recent work of Wiersema (2013) it is highlighted that, nowadays, (a) companies want to break down inter-organizational barriers, (b) no function is closer to Marketing than Sales, and no function is arguably more important to marketing's performance (however measured) than Sales, and (c) M&S have little choice but to become much more aligned and integrated to deal with the rigors of competition in years to come. Indeed, in 48% of the companies examined in the work of Wiersma (2013), the M-S interface was singled out as a key determinant of longer-term marketplace success. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is only one study (Brenčič, Biemans and Malshe, 2009, also reported by Biemans, Brenčič and Malshe, 2010) focusing exclusively to M-S interface configurations in B2B firms. This particular study (i.e. Brenčič et al., 2009) followed a qualitative method by applying

semi-structured in-depth interviews to more than 100 managers from various industries, and identified four different M-S interfaces.

Against this background, this paper attempts to further contribute to this research domain by (a) building on the work of Brenčič et al. (2009), examining for each type of interface constructs such as (i) the relative power of M&S, (ii) the level of conflict between M&S, (iii) the level of M-S collaboration, (iv) the effectiveness of M-S relationship, and (v) the degree of customer orientation of M&S, and (b) identifying the effectiveness of each interface in terms of company performance.

Literature Review
& Research Question Development

Over the years, much has been said and written about the performance benefits of effective M-S interfaces, as well as about the inherent differences between the functions (e.g., goals, time horizons, incentive structures, modes of operation, scope) that need to be reconciled (Wiersma, 2013).

Focusing on B2C firms, there are three recent studies examining M-S interfaces, as shown in table 1. The variables that these studies are using for classifying the companies are (a) the relative power of M&S, (b) the type of relationship between M&S (in terms of conflict, cooperation, or joint planning), (c) market knowledge and information exchange between M&S, and (d) structure of M&S.

Focusing on B2B firms, apparently there is only one study examining M-S interfaces (Brenčič et al., 2009), considering the structure of M&S, the tasks of marketing, the type of relationship (in terms of communication, information exchange and collaboration), as well as firm's orientation, as shown in table 2. Additionally, Brenčič et al. (2009) showed that no single configuration is inherently superior; each configuration has its own benefits and disadvantages (see table 3).

Table 1. Marketing-Sales interfaces in B2C firms

Method	Variables used for classification	Key findings/propositions	Authors
Empirical classification based on 337 questionnaires from Marketing or Sales executives	(a) information exchange by M&S, (b) joint planning, (c) relative power of M&S, (d) M&S market knowledge	A taxonomy of five M-S interfaces emerged; the most effective interface (in terms of cooperation quality and market performance) is characterized by (a) high level of information sharing between M&S, (b) joint planning, (c) equal level of power between M&S, and (d) high market knowledge from both units	Homburg, Jensen i Krohmer (2008)
Conceptual classification	(a) type of relationship between M&S (conflict) (b) structure (c) relative power of M&S	A taxonomy of four M-S interfaces is proposed; in the most effective interface (in terms of relationship quality) Marketing & Sales (a) are integrated activities, (b) are using feedback from each other, (c) have established and shared goals, (d) are evaluated and rewarded based on shared metrics, and (e) behave as if they'll "rise or fall together	Kotler, Rackham i Krishnaswamy (2006)
Empirical classification based on 132 firms; data were gathered from both M&S managers of these firms (264 usable questionnaires)	(a) relative power of M&S (b) decision authority of M&S over basic marketing activities (c) M-S conflict	A taxonomy of three M-S interfaces emerged; the most effective interface (in terms of company performance) is characterized by (a) high and equal level of power between M&S, (b) joint involvement of M&S in the strategic decisions of market segmentation, targeting and positioning (c) relatively high authority of Sales regarding pricing and distribution decisions, and (d) low level of dysfunctional conflict between M&S	Lionakis, Avlonitis i Panagopoulos (2013)

Table 2. **Interfejsy marketing-sprzedaż w firmach B2B**

	Invisible marketing	Sales in the driver's seat	Distinct functional symbiosis	Distinct functional symbiosis
Functional separation	• No separation between the two functions • All marketing and sales tasks performed by the same individual (s)	• Marketing function either as spinoff of sales or a newly hired marketing manager	• Marketing and sales are separate and distinct functions • Both functions have their own identity and job descriptions	• Marketing and sales are separate, yet closely related and complementary
Tasks of marketing	• Huge emphasis on sales activities • Key tasks for both M&S people are lead generation and follow-up; no real awareness of „marketing"	• Marketing as a sales support	• Marketing formulates plans and sales implements them • Marketing combines information across sales territories and creates programs	• M&S equally engaged in creating and executing strategies; there are no clear lines of responsibility demarcation • Sales appreciates the added value of marketing, marketing tries to create more value for sales
Interfunctional communication	Communication (if any) is intuitive	Marketing wishes there is more informal communication	• More frequent communication during meetings with formal feedback • Communication focuses on current strategies and activities	• Extensive use of both formal and informal means of communication • Sales and marketing voluntarily contribute information
Information sharing	• No specific mechanisms to share information	• Sales does not acknowledge that marketing needs information from them	• Sales is encouraged to share feedback	• Constant and freely shared information hallmark of this stage
Collaboration	• Easy to achieve collaboration	• Marketing takes initiative; sales is passive about collaboration opportunities or possibilities	• In some firms, collaboration is totally absent; both functions exist in silos and do not work together	• Most activities are joint activities • Both functions see value in obtaining assistance from the other group

Cont. table 2.

	Invisible marketing	Sales in the driver's seat	Distinct functional symbiosis	Distinct functional symbiosis
Dominant orientation and interfunctional relationships	● Sales orientation dominates	● Sales orientation dominates, but traces of marketing /strategic perspectives evident	● Sales tries to protect its turf Clear cultural differences between the functions; if not managed well, they decrease the interface's productivity	● M&S cooperate well ● Mutual respect and appreciation are evident ● Conflicts are avoided or resolved constructively
Outcomes	Absence of long-term strategic thinking and planning	Sales wants to retain autonomy; some actions are not consistent with marketing's suggested plans	Value for customers decreases when M&S are not on the same page	Increased value creation for customers

Apparently, basic ingredients of a successful M-S interface are (a) high and equal level of power between M&S, (b) fair and smooth relationships between M&S which allow interfunctional communication and information exchange, (c) equal involvement of M&S in the firm's strategic decisions, and (d) market knowledge.

Table 3. Marketing-Sales interface configurations and outcomes (Biemans, Brenčič and Malshe 2010)

	Invisible marketing	Sales in the driver's seat	Distinct functional symbiosis	Distinct functional symbiosis
Value delivery	• Actual delivery largely determined by the sales representative • Salespeople offer personalized customer service	• Focus on physical product plus a few intangibles	• Marketing creates intangible value and supports tangible value provided by sales • Value for customers decreases when M&S are not on the same page	• Both functions participate in all aspects of designing, developing and offering value to customers • Ability to deliver superior value to customers that encompasses both tangible and intangible elements
Responsiveness	• Very responsive to changing short-term needs of individual customers • Always in a reactive mode • Lacks the ability to identify and respond to macro-level changes	• Sales wants to retain autonomy; some actions are not consistent with marketing's suggested plans	• Emerging responsiveness to longterm needs; firms are proactive in identifying emerging market/customer needs	• Highly responsive to both short and long-term needs, because of joint activities and shared perspective
Marketing consistency	• Inconsistencies likely across customers and across industries sales reps • Marketing messages differ across territories	Marketing provides framework for communication to sales; reduces variability	• More overall adherence to marketing strategies	• Significant adherence to strategies since both functions are involved in strategy creation and execution
Benefits of current stage (gains)	• Effective and efficient communication • Strong focus on individual customers	• Marketing creates its own niche and increases sales' awareness concerning their added value	• Increased long-term strategic perspective • Ability to balance both short-term and long-term goals	• Increased value creation for customers • Significant attention paid to latent and emerging needs in the marketplace

Cont. table 3.

	Invisible marketing	Sales in the driver's seat	Distinct functional symbiosis	Distinct functional symbiosis
Disadvantages of current stage (losses)	• Absence of long-term strategic thinking and planning • understanding of marketing's potential; thus, not optimal use of latent capabilities	• Emerging turf battles and breakdown in Communication • Lack of understanding of marketing's added value	• Potential differences between marketing and sales • More room for misunderstanding and miscommunication • Potential for classic problems of animosity, lack of respect, mutual disregard, as noted in the literature	• Danger of groupthink • Lack of dissent may be counterproductive

Based on this ground, the objective of this paper is to provide a classification of B2B firms, considering (a) the structure of M&S, (b) the relative power of M&S, (c) the level of conflict between M&S, (d) the level of M-S collaboration, (e) the effectiveness of M-S relationship, and (f) the degree of customer orientation of M&S, in order to identify the most effective M-S interface.

Research method

Sample & data collection

The population of this study is B2B companies with turnover of more than 10 million euros and number of employees of more than 50 operating in Greece. Based on TNS' list of companies we identified 410 firms as fulfilling the above criteria. Once we identified the key informant (i.e. the Marketing or the Sales manager), we informed him/her about our study and requested participation, guaranteeing anonymity. After two follow-ups, 98 firms agreed to participate in the research (24% response rate). In order to collect data a self-administrated structured questionnaire was applied on line to the Marketing or the Sales manager of each firm. Informants were employed by

their firms for more than five years and were able to provide detailed information about the current M-S interface.

Measures

As shown in table 4 we applied two types of measures: (a) a nominal scale (for capturing the structure of M&S units) following the prescriptions of Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy (2008), and (b) reflective multi-item scales using Likert-type measurement (for capturing the power of Sales unit, the power of Marketing unit, the level of M-S conflict, the level of M-S collaboration, the effectiveness of M-S relationship, the degree of customer orientation, and company performance), since, if observed variables are interchangeable manifestations of an underlying construct, a reflective measurement model is appropriate (Bagozzi & Baumgartner, 1994).

Table 4. **Operationalization of study variables**

Variables (N=98)	Adopted from	Mean (SD)/descriptive		AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha
Structure	Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy (2008)	(a) joint department (one director): 33% (b) joint department (two directors): 22% (c) two separate departments (two directors): 45%		na	na	na
Power of Marketing	Kohli (1989)	5 items	3.66 (.90)	.849	.801	.932
Power of Sales	Kohli (1989)	5 items	4.21 (.71)	.879	.820	.925
M&S conflict	Jaworski & Kohli (1993)	7 items	3.55 (.88)	.866	.897	.901
Collaboration between M&S	Hult, Ketchen & Slater (2002)	4 items	4.09 (.65)	.644	.712	.834
Effectiveness of M-S relationship	Ruekert & Walker (1987)	5 items	3.89 (.71)	.720	.758	.801
Customer orientation	Deshpande et al. (1993)	5 items	3.96 (.58)	.685	.738	.894
Company performance	Avlonitis & Gounaris (1997)	8 items	3.29 (.99)	.682	.720	.827

Notes (1) Scales were reversed-scored, where necessary, so that higher score levels would always represent higher levels of each construct's value (2) The study measures company performance in terms of profits, sales volume, market share and ROI. Key informants evaluated firm performance using a five point scale (a) in comparison with the main competitor (1: much worse, 5: much better), and (b) by indicating their degree of the firm's satisfaction (1: very unpleased, 5: very pleased)

We assessed reliability and validity of the reflective multi-item measures with multifactorial confirmatory factor analysis. The measurement model shows a reasonable good fit with the data: $\chi^2_{101} = 744$; comparative fit index (CFI) = .921; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .920; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) =. 058. All items load significantly on the hypothesized latent variables, indicating convergent validity. As table 4 shows, each construct manifests a composite reliability (CR) of at least 0.7 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Average variance extracted (AVE) is at least .60 and higher than the φ^2 ?2 for any pair of latent variables, which supports the discriminant validity of the reflective measures (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 5 reports the correlations matrix and descriptive statistics for the study's reflective measures.

Since, the sample cumulates respondents from both Marketing and Sales, it is necessary to probe whether the structural patterns in the data set differ between these respondents. We tested whether the correlation matrix of the indicator variables differs between M&S respondents. The null hypothesis that variable correlations of the M&S respondents are equal cannot be rejected at a 5% significance level. This test represents strong evidence that responses from M&S do not differ and that pooling the two groups is justified, and provides also evidence against common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 5. **Correlations and descriptive statistics**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Power of Marketing	1						
2 Power of Sales	-. 104 (ns)	1					
3 M&S conflict	-. 098 (ns)	. 198*	1				
4 Collaboration between M&S	. 240*	. 054 (ns)		-. 487**	1		
5 Effectiveness of M-S relationship	. 221*	. 087 (ns)		-. 465**	. 523**	1	
6 Customer orientation	. 421**	-. 202*	-. 501**	. 489**	. 487**	1	
7 Company performance	. 478**	-. 197*	-. 512**	. 533**	. 501**	. 598**	1
Mean (SD	3.66 (. 90)	4.21 (. 71)	3.55 (. 88)	4.09 (. 65)	3.89 (. 71)	3.96 (. 58)	3.29 (. 99)

Notes: *p<. 05/**p<. 01/not significant /N=98

Analyses and results

We took a four-stage clustering approach, building on procedures that Bunn (1993), Cannon and Perreault (1999), and Homburg, Workman, and Jensen (2002) use. The four core issues in clustering are (a) determining the number of clusters, (b) assigning observations to clusters, (c) assessing the stability of cluster assignments, and (d) interpreting the results. First, to determine the appropriate number of clusters, and given the fact that the objective of this work is to expand the results of Brenèiè et al. (2009), we followed their prescriptions asking for a four-cluster solution. Second, to assign observations to clusters, we clustered the complete sample by a hybrid approach (Punj & Stewart 1983) that combined Ward's method with the k-means method, following the prescriptions of Homburg et al. (2008). Third, to assess the stability of the cluster assignment, we used the cross-validation procedure proposed by McIntyre and Blashfield (1980). Finally, we validated whether our four clusters have meaningful interpretations, and we tested for differences among these M-S interfaces as shown in table 6. Following the interpretation suggested by Bunn (1993), we compared the cluster means on the continuous variables, using Waller and Duncan's (1969) k-ratio t-test. Cluster means carrying the same superscript do not differ at a 5% significance level. Also, we translated the statistical ranges into verbal descriptions (see Table 6).

The descriptive variables of the firms (respondent's experience and functional background, turnover, number of employees) were not used as active cluster variables. Thus, we explored whether the clusters differ with respect to these descriptive variables. We found no significant differences regarding these variables.

Table 6. Effectiveness of Marketing-Sales interfaces

N=98	Invisible marketing (N=32)	Sales in the driver's seat (N=21)	Distinct functional symbiosis (N=24)	Sustainable symbiosis (N=21)
Structure of M&S	• M&S are merged in one department • All M&S tasks performed by the same individual(s) **(33%)**	• M&S functions have its own managers, even if these two functions may be merged in one department **(22%)**	• M&S are separate and distinct functions **(24%)**	• M&S are separate and distinct functions **(21%)**
Relative power of M&S units	Not applicable	Not applicable	Sales dominates Marketing **(Marketing power: 3.11b)** **(Sales power: 4.30a)**	M&S are sharing high level of power **(Marketing power: 4.09a)** **(Sales power: 4.12a)**
Conflict between M&S	Not applicable	Moderate — high (3.77b)	High (4.01a)	Low (2.98c)
Collaboration between M&S	Not applicable	Moderate — high (4.12a, b)	Moderate (3.63b)	High (4.34a)
Effectiveness of relationship	Not applicable	Moderate — high (3.96a, b)	Moderate (3.61b)	High (4.12a)
Customer orientation	Low (3.13c)	Moderate (3.93b)	Moderate — low (3.58b, c)	High (4.47a)
Company performance	Low (2.88c)	Moderate (3.32b)	Moderate — low (2.98b, c)	High (3.82a)

Notes Reported values are mean values if not indicated otherwise. In each row, cluster means that have the same superscript are not significantly different (p < .05) on the basis of Waller and Duncan's (1969) multiple-range test. Means in the highest bracket are assigned the superscript "a," means in the next lower bracket are assigned the superscript "b," and so forth.

Discussion

Our four M-S configurations confirm the findings of Brenčič et al. (2009) regarding the existence of these interfaces in B2B firms. However, while Brenčič et al. (2009) presented a dynamic spectrum of four different M-S interfaces, that may be useful for B2B firms, with each configuration having its own benefits and disadvantages, representing a different organizational

arrangement, different operating/process characteristics and different outcomes, we expanded these results by identifying the most effective interface in terms smooth relationship between M&S and enhanced performance. Our study indicated that the quality and outcomes of the M-S interface depend on the characteristics of both functions and how the interface is organized. The most effective interface appears to be "Sustainable symbiosis" since it is characterized by (a) high and equal level of power between the M&S units, (b) low level of conflict between M&S, (c) high level of M-S collaboration, (d) high effectiveness of relationship between M&S, (e) high degree of customer orientation, and (f) high company performance.. This finding is consistent with those reported by Homurg et al. (2008), Kotler et al. (2006), and Lionakis et al. (2013), in B2C firms.

Therefore, managers are provided with a systematic way to think through the design of their M-S interface. Based on this knowledge, they may identify elements of their current M-S configuration that need to be strengthened, modified or developed. A firm's business performance greatly depends on how these two functions work together (Guenzi & Troilo, 2007) and how smooth, well-coordinated and conflict free this interface stays (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000). Smoothly functioning M-S interfaces may offer many benefits - e.g. timely dissemination of market information, coordination of marketing activities in creating superior customer value, and market responsiveness (Biemans et al., 2010). In the view of that, top management should strive to work in order to build stronger interfaces between M&S; this drive is particularly important for B2B companies considering marketing's evolving and increasingly strategic role in demanding marketplaces (Wiersema, 2013).

Accordingly emphasis should be placed on (a) the effectiveness of the relationship between M&S units, (b) any status and power differences of the M&S units, (c) reducing the level of dysfunctional conflict between M&S units, (d) enhancing the quality of collaboration between M&S units, and (e) the adoption of a customer oriented philosophy by M&S units. These help firms to further develop and leverage their M-S interface and thus to contribute to their firm's market orientation and business performance. To do so, (a) internal processes are needed for focusing on customer desires and on competitors' strategies, and enhancing inter-functional coordination between M&S, (b) barriers between these two

units should be removed and both units should be provided with an equal strategic voice, and (c) structural linkages such as teamwork, joint planning, job rotation policies, sharing of info, joint training programs, and joint customer visits of M&S executives should be fostered.

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