

A Commentary
on “Undergraduate Education:
The Implications
of Cross-Functional Relationships
in Business Marketing—
The Skills of High-Performing Managers”

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ABSTRACT. This commentary reinforces the importance and need for developing the student’s knowledge, abilities, and understanding of what is required to collaborate with the firm’s internal and external constituencies, in the context of B2B marketing environment. It is an important goal to be achieved in the B2B marketing course. The new era of business marketing is built around achieving “collaborative advantage” with the new breed of customers who demand relatively more complex product and services arrangements as well as nature of relationships from their vendors. Today’s customers also expect intellectual input and consultative selling approaches from group of diverse and independent marketing entities, whom they expect to work together to meet their requirements. The firm’s success or failure in the market place may indeed be predicated on their ability to achieve this “collaborative advantage”. The commentary also expands the authors’ suggestions in the areas of course pedagogy and design for building the student’s know-how and capability for practicing the art-of-collaboration. doi:10.1300/J033v14n01_10 [*Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.Haworth Press.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.*]

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Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing, Vol. 14(1) 2007

Available online at <http://jbbm.haworthpress.com>

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doi:10.1300/J033v14n01_10

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KEYWORDS. Undergraduate education, business marketing education and business education

The authors of the article, “Undergraduate Business Marketing Education: Exploring the Collaborative Skills of High-Performing Marketing Managers,” (Hutt and Speh), argue for expanding the skills-set of the B2B marketing student to include “managerial work” (Mintzberg 1994). By “managerial work,” the authors refer to the functions a manager performs simultaneously at three levels, viz., managing by information (communicating and controlling), managing through people (leading and linking), and managing tasks/actions. The goal of “managerial work” is to achieve collaboration among various constituents of the firm. In the context of B2B marketing, collaboration may be defined as the integration and management of diverse interests and requirements of various internal and external constituents of the firm. It also involves securing resources, support, and control necessary for the implementation of responsive marketing strategies. Essentially, effective marketing managers demonstrate a distinctive set of collaborative skills, in addition to the analytical skills generally emphasized in marketing management courses.

The authors proceed to identify specific characteristics, competencies, and/or skills necessary to achieve collaboration in the B2B marketing context. They derive their list from research on the characteristics and behaviors of reputationally effective managers, top performing managers in charge of cross-functional relationships, and sales personnel and customer account managers. Probably the most significant contribution comes from the reputationally effective manager. Reputational effectiveness is defined as the degree to which the manager is responsive to the needs and expectations of various internal/external constituents of the firm, including functional areas within the firm and customer organizations, upstream and down stream value chain partners, and other business and strategic alliance partners.

Overall, the authors emphasize the following attributes/skills necessary for developing collaborative capability:

- Role-taking ability, including volunteering and taking initiative and leading
- Ability to communicate effectively and efficiently
- Understand and appreciate the cognitive and emotional perspectives of diverse constituents

- Ability to build relationship networks among customers, functional experts within the firm, and key industry personnel
- Relational competencies (e.g., openness, transcending boundaries, flexibility, and responsiveness)
- An awareness of and an ability to implement appropriate conflict management and influence strategies

Lastly, the authors make several pedagogical recommendations for equipping the B2B marketing student with the skills and competencies deemed instrumental in creating effective collaboration. Overall, the article does a nice job identifying a gap in educational objectives for the B2B course, which has emerged from complex business models and technological innovations, and subsequent shifts in organizational customers' demands. An equally impressive job is done in distilling a collection of skills and qualities to help bridge this gap between academic training and practice. The focus of my commentary, therefore, is three-fold: first, to reinforce the need and pervasiveness of opportunities for collaboration in the practice of B2B marketing; to offer additional pedagogical suggestions; and to recommend an implication for the B2B course design.

BUSINESS MARKETING TRENDS SUPPORTING COLLABORATION SKILLS

Most marketing practitioners would strongly endorse the building of students' collaborative skills in B2B Marketing courses. Many marketing educators would also agree that while this is considered to be an important educational objective, it is under-pursued and under-achieved. With recent market place demands from customers, business trends, and marketing practices, collaborative skills have become imperative to success. A common feature of emerging organizational forms is collaboration, covering a diversity of relationships from vertical supplier-buyer relations to technology know-how exchanges, joint product development, cooperative research, and collaborative marketing arrangements (Grant and Baden-Fuller 1995), among business partners who may be geographically dispersed around the world with unique cultural differences and customs. Large customers are looking for suppliers who will provide innovative and unique solutions to meet their complex requirements, and supplement physical products with additive services which assist in effective and efficient purchasing and pricing models.

This involves buying product components, parts, services, and technology tools from several discrete manufactures around the world and expecting the vendor to meet functional compatibility requirements among various product-parts over the product's life cycle (Schmitz 2000). Today's customers also expect to receive intellectual input from vendors and consultative selling approaches. Such collaborative actions and resources help to establish long-term relationships. They also result in more timely development and marketing of new products, as well as mass customizing strategies, and stronger integration and coordination within the supply and demand chains. Value chain partners find that collaborating, as a team within the entire value chain, is the best approach to improve performance. For example, Collaborative Planning, Forecasting, and Replenishment model greatly improved demand sales forecast and level of inventory to carry by Wal-Mart Stores and its suppliers (Ireland 2005). This "new breed" of customer demands a new, relatively more complicated product and marketing arrangements and relationships. To cultivate and nurture the marketing relationships requires adeptness at integration, understanding, and the ability to multitask among different individuals at many different levels of development and service. It is the collaboration of all the loose parts that in effect become the consummate product to be sold and to be viewed by the customer as holding value.

The trends in collaborative working relationships among customers, vendors, and business partners have also given rise to technological innovations and collaborative computing and Web-based project and relationship-management software tools that facilitate the collaboration between large and mid-size vendors and customers (Attaran and Attaran 2002). In this new environment, dispersed team members from multiple disciplines work cooperatively to adapt to competitive situations in the global marketplace. Industry forecasts indicate an expanding and brighter future for these products as well as shifting B2B landscape culminating in demand for inter-enterprise collaboration and resources (Schmitz 2000). The new era of business marketing built around "collaborative advantage" by demonstrating special skills in managing relationships with key customers and jointly developing innovative strategies with alliance partners (Kanter 1994) has become the new criterion by which success and failure will be determined in the marketplace. One might even argue that what was once considered holding comparative advantage has now become having collaborative advantage, including speedier product development and marketing, cost savings in the areas of

research and development, operations, and marketing, through pooling of resources.

DEEPER CUSTOMER KNOWLEDGE REQUIREMENT

Understanding the customer's business is critical to success. To forge a collaborative relationship with a customer, the business marketer requires a deep understanding of the customer's business, its key competitors, its goals and strategies, and even those of the customer's customers (Day 2000). Several types of communication links are required across the partnering organizations at all levels of management (Cannon and Perreault 1999). The essence of business-to-business marketing comes from the nature of buyer-seller relationships. They become bound together in a mutual quest for attainment of their organizational purposes. This means the seller must sometimes invent a product to satisfy the customer needs. The complexity of buyer-seller relationships and the dynamic nature of the product are the principal source of new product ideas and development. Entering long-term relationships and negotiation of the terms and conditions of the alliance with value chain partners is also an important aspect of B2B marketing. Knowledge of superior influence strategies and conflict resolution methods and processes, e.g., persuasion, compromise, problem solving or integrated bargaining (Thomas 1976; Webster 1984) is important for successfully producing collaboration. Superior collaborative and relationship building skills and acumen for relationship-specific adaptation are, therefore, a valuable asset for the B2B marketing and something that can and needs to be cultivated in the classroom. Indeed, the applications of collaboration are pervasive across several B2B marketing practices and strategies.

COURSE COVERAGE AND SUGGESTIONS

The authors of the article identify several areas that should be incorporated into the education and training of future B2B marketing professionals. The areas include managing cross-functional relationships, relationship marketing, organizational buying process and criteria, sales management, and customer relationship management and managing information systems. Pedagogical suggestions include more field projects involving development of social networks; inclusion of guest speakers

from various functional areas like R & D and supply chain management; joint field projects that bring together marketing and engineering students from local universities in designing new products and assessing market opportunities; and two very relevant case studies published by Harvard Case Clearing House, involving customer account management.

Consistent with the pervasive nature of collaboration in B2B marketing practices, however, the topical areas should be expanded. Applications of collaboration and related issues can also be discussed when covering business marketing perspectives, managing relationships in business markets, new product development and testing, business marketing channels, management of supplier relationships, vendor selection criteria, role of multi-person sales team in the personal selling process, e-Commerce strategies, managing relationships with strategic alliance partners, and marketing of IT software, and tools that facilitate business-to-business marketing practices. The pedagogical tools can be expanded to include: field projects involving case development on actual companies with a focus on illustrating problems, issues and opportunities in developing collaborative solutions, since good cases are hard to come by on the topic of collaboration. Team of guest speakers from marketing and customer organization jointly also would be effective in portraying the process of achieving collaborative marketing solutions and the issues that would have surfaced within each organizations. Role-playing exercises can be incorporated in the classroom involving negotiation of terms, conditions, and arrangements for forging long-term relationships among upstream and down stream value chain partners with a goal to identify antecedents for successful collaboration. One of the many current event assignments should revolve around evaluating the various IT tools and software (e.g., ERP, PRM < CRM, SCM) currently available for managing B2B collaborative efforts. This could even include in-class demonstration of how these software works and be improved to facilitate collaborative relationships in business-to-business marketing practices. The above pedagogical assignments when discussed in the context of specific B2B marketing topics will go a long way to develop the student's skills and competency in applying the art of collaboration and strengthening B2B marketing practices. Additionally, literature reviews can be assigned on several aspects of collaboration to increase an awareness and importance of interdisciplinary academic research contributions on collaborative perspective, including how organizations create and nurture the "culture" and "environment" for influencing its' employees predispositions (opinions, atti-

tudes, values, goals, etc.) for nurturing the art of collaboration. This session should preferably be scheduled toward the end of the semester, as capstone session. Finally, and most importantly, B2B educators should include “learning the art and applications of collaboration” as an important course objective in their course syllabi. This is likely to raise the commitment of the course instructor and students to achieve that goal.

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doi:10.1300/J033v14n01_10