



Boundary spanning and customer service styles in business solutions implementation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 January 2015

Received in revised form 4 November 2015

Accepted 5 November 2015

Available online 10 November 2015

Keywords:

Mental model

Buyer–supplier relationship

Frontline employee

Service worker

Customer perceived value

Emotion concept

Problem concept

ABSTRACT

An onus rests with members of supplier firms to successfully navigate inter-firm boundaries so as to achieve customer outcomes while also satisfying supervisor requirements. This need is particularly acute during the often lengthy, complex and intense processes that characterize business solutions implementation. Currently, limited research exists as to how boundary spanners reconcile between these tensions to achieve customer outcomes. It is, therefore, the focus of the present study. Drawing on interviews with 45 respondents, the study finds that boundary spanners adopt 'customer service styles' — Consistent behaviors to address customer requirements while reconciling between multiple tensions. These styles are labeled 'dynamic engagement', 'dynamic avoidance', 'anticipatory engagement' and 'anticipatory avoidance'. The study also explores the nature of the underlying mental models that boundary spanners use. The study also considers the effects of these customer service styles on customer-perceived value, with not all customer service styles having equal effects.

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1. Introduction

Boundary spanners are crucial for successful buyer–supplier exchange in business markets. With a focus on supplier firm members, existing studies suggest that boundary spanning encourages political support and facilitates access to network resources (Brion, Chauvet, Chollet, and Mothe, 2012; Zhang, Viswanathan, and Henke, 2011). Boundary spanners also have important roles in understanding customer requirements, when dealing with customer problems and when managing implementation processes (Jong, Ruyter, and Lemmink, 2004; Piercy, 2009; Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads, 1994). Boundary spanners are particularly relevant in business solutions environments. Business solutions involve the implementation of a complex suite of products and services that address a customer firm's specific requirements (Nordin and Kowalkowski, 2010; Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj, 2007). Successful business solution implementations involve multiple intense relationships between supplier representatives and customer representatives (Prior, 2013; Tuli et al., 2007; Windahl and Lakemond, 2006).

While boundary spanners from supplier firms are essential to successful buyer–supplier relationships, a number of constraints shape their activities. Studies in business-to-consumer contexts suggest these relate to limitations in time, resources and information access (Singh, 1993, 2000). Managing these constraints often involves a trade-off between addressing customer needs and addressing supervisor needs (Zablah, Franke, Brown & Bartholomew, 2012). While

previous studies of sales and frontline personnel recognize a need for trade-offs in boundary spanning activities in business-to-business settings (Singh, 1998), what is less clear are how these contribute to boundary spanner behaviors, their determinants, and the effects of these behaviors on customer perceptions. This is particularly relevant to business solutions due to the high intensity of implementation relationships and the potential for burnout that often accompanies poor boundary-spanner behavioral approaches (Zablah, Chonko, Bettencourt, Allen & Haas, 2012; Zablah, Franke, et al., 2012).

One way in which boundary spanners can address these tensions is by adopting stylistic service behaviors (DiMascio, 2010). This lowers boundary spanner stress by reducing the time and effort necessary to understand information as well as in adopting appropriate behavior. Underpinning this process are boundary spanner mental models, which comprise a set of decision-making heuristics that activate across similar situations (Day and Nedungadi, 1994; Gary and Wood, 2011). Mental models help define boundary spanner situational interpretations. They also help boundary spanners select appropriate situational behaviors with minimal effort by automatically excluding inappropriate options. Due to their selective nature, ensuring complementarity between supplier and customer representatives' mental models increases the likelihood of relationship success (De Chernatony, Daniels, and Johnson, 1994; Strandvik, Holmlund, and Edvardsson, 2012). As such, mental models are an important underpinning of boundary spanner behaviors. Previous research into boundary-spanner customer-facing behaviors tends to focus on adaptation, creativity or customer orientation (Agnihotri, Rapp, Andzulis, and Gabler,

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2013; Gwinner, Bitner, Brown, and Kumar, 2005; Zablah, Franke, et al., 2012). Overall, these studies consider only a single type of customer-facing behavior at a time. Moreover, they generally do not consider or the nature of the mental model that underpins the behavior or the associated variations in customer outcomes.

Therefore, the goals of this study are to first establish the nature of 'customer service styles' – i.e. typical boundary spanner behaviors that focus on addressing customer requirements while dealing with contextual constraints – during business solution implementations. The study suggests four major types of customer service style are relevant – dynamic engagement, dynamic avoidance, anticipatory engagement and anticipatory avoidance. The study describes the essential characteristics of these customer service styles in behavioral terms. Second, the study draws on coping theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) to unpack the nature of the underpinning mental models that influence the selection of specific behaviors. This provides an alternative to the traditional focus on goal-oriented boundary spanner motivations (Gwinner et al., 2005; Keaveney and Nelson, 1993). Third, the study describes the resulting customer value perceptions as these relate to each customer service style. The findings rely on depth interviews with 45 respondents active in business solutions contexts.

For managers, this study serves as a basis for decisions regarding the composition of the supplier implementation team. There is scope to design team membership around customer service styles given a particular set of supplier goals, contextual constraints and customer requirements. While the study does not suggest an 'ideal' team, it does describe the likely customer perceptions from each style. This could help when deciding on how to approach a given customer engagement. Moreover, the customer service styles reflect different levels of experience and different dispositions of key boundary spanners. This could help when designing training and professional development courses while also aiding in selection and recruitment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Boundary spanner customer service behaviors

This study focuses on how boundary-spanners address customer requirements while coping with multiple tensions. Two main types of boundary spanner receive most attention in existing research. Sales personnel focus on how to address customer requirements through products and services. Sales personnel are more likely to experience an intense set of customer interactions in the lead up to securing the sale. As such, adapting an existing suite of products and services to customer requirements becomes an essential element of securing a purchase order (Chakrabarty, Brown, and Widing, 2013; Franke and Park, 2006; Spiro and Weitz, 1990). Frontline personnel, in contrast, focus on fulfilling customer orders. Their customer service activities include arranging for delivery, installation and addressing problems (Dagger, Danaher, Sweeney, and Mccoll-kennedy, 2013; Gwinner et al., 2005; Prior, 2015). In both cases, boundary spanners benefit from understanding the nature of supervisor and customer requirements as well as relevant contextual constraints since this allows them to navigate in such a way that they minimize the negative effects of burnout (Singh et al., 1994; Singh, 1993).

Boundary spanners can adopt one of many alternative behaviors for any given customer service situation. However, the time and effort necessary to consider these and to then adopt an appropriate behavior, given existing constraints, can be stifling. Therefore, the repeated use of similar behaviors for similar situations is attractive. Indeed, customer service styles are important in business market contexts. Blocker, Flint, Myers, & Slater (2010) show that customer service styles can be 'proactive' or 'reactive' during implementation. Lewis, Welsh, Dehler, & Green (2002) show that project managers tend to adopt 'emergent' or 'planned' styles to project implementation. This involves different approaches to achieving project outcomes as well as managing multiple customer interactions. Similarly, Reid, Pullins, & Plank (2002) suggest

that sales personnel moderate their customer communication style depending on circumstances.

While existing research in this area is informative, it currently tends to focus on a single type of customer-facing behavior at a time. These generally relate to adaptive, creative or customer-oriented behaviors (Agnihotri et al., 2013; Gwinner et al., 2005; Zablah, Franke, et al., 2012). While Singh (2000) suggests at least two gradations of behavior type – those that focus on quality (i.e. high time and effort for comprehensive outcomes) and those that focus on productivity (i.e. targeted time and effort for specific outcomes) – few studies consider the role of productivity behaviors fully. This is a concern since this type of behavior has been linked to higher profitability for the supplier firm (Ye, Marinova, and Singh, 2011). Moreover, no current studies offer comparisons between customer service styles, thus limiting the ability for managers to select between possible alternatives.

2.2. Selecting customer service styles: the role of mental models

The mental models of boundary spanners are likely to influence their choice of customer service style. Mental models emerge from previous experience and amount to a simplification of knowledge structures as these apply to a given situation (Hodgkinson and Johnson, 1994; Hodgkinson, 2002). Through experience, boundary spanners are likely to refine their understanding. This process then leads to a simplification of the decision-making process across similar situations and, ultimately, a consistent pattern of behavior results. The use of mental models is particularly relevant in complex situations – where there is considerable ambiguity and uncertainty (Porac, Thomas, and Baden-Fuller, 2011; Rosa, Porac, Runser-Spanjol, and Saxon, 1999).

Many boundary-spanners interpret their roles as stressful. Indeed, boundary-spanner research suggests that burnout and job stress are likely outcomes from customer service situations (Ashill, Rod, Thirkell, and Carruthers, 2009; Sand and Miyazaki, 2000; Singh et al., 1994). This interpretation is likely to inform the development of their mental models. The repeated instances of similar circumstances over time are likely to support the gradual simplification of such situations into a suite of decision-making heuristics. The interpretation of stressful situations tends to have either a problem focus or an emotion focus (Folkman and Lazarus, 1986; Folkman, 1992; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Problem focused approaches involve trying to mitigate the source of stress. For example, Nonis, Sager, & Kumar (1996) show that sales personnel can mitigate stress by influencing senior management views. Emotion-focused approaches involve dealing with the emotional outcomes of stress. In some cases, this involves separating from the employer (Lewin and Sager, 2010; Wang, 2009).

There appears to be a relationship between the boundary spanner's interpretation of the situation (emotion concept and problem concept) and their mental model. This in turn influences the manifestation of their customer service style (see Fig. 1). In taking this approach, the present study offers a way to understand how boundary spanners select customer service styles. This approach reflects earlier boundary spanner research that shows a direct link between intrinsic motivators and behavior (Keaveney and Nelson, 1993; Porter, Claycomb, and Kraft, 2008). However, the approach in this study takes additional steps by suggesting different mental model characteristics, resultant customer service styles and customer perceived value.

2.3. Boundary spanners and customer perceived value

Customer perceived value is an important goal for boundary-spanners in business market contexts (Hult, 2011; Jong et al., 2004). This involves providing an excess of benefits when compared to costs and/or helping customers to achieve their purchase goals (Lemke, Clark, and Wilson, 2011; Prior, 2013). Business solutions implementation is a context where this is of central importance due to the high emphasis on customer centricity (Frankenberger, Weiblen, and Gassmann,

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