



Industrial sales people as market actors

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ABSTRACT

We develop the concept of boundaries in the context of sales personnel and their counterparts encountering and negotiating these while they undertake work to shape markets and build relationships. Drawing on a case study from production chemistry, we show that market shaping implies a mutual development of relationships, goods and services exchanged, and boundaries. In particular, we show that while relationships can submerge and obscure parts or dimensions of boundaries to other market actors, normal business activities such as testing new products and adapting products to changes in environmental legislation make visible some material dimensions of the exchange object, which can attract attention from other sellers. Visibility finds an expression as those market objects are exchanged, such that objects can be devices by which other actors join in and position themselves and their objects within markets.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have for a long time regarded sales personnel as being the prototypical boundary spanners, mediating directly and personally between the buying and selling organizations (e.g. [Lysonski & Johnson, 1983](#); [Matsuo, 2006](#)). Relationship selling, as a paradigm, has propagated a belief that with the right training and tools, sales people can suspend or even suppress a market by creating and maintaining strong and enduring relationships with their customers ([Tzokas, Saren, & Kyziridis, 2001](#); [Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005](#)). [Guenzi, Pardo, and Georges \(2007\)](#), for instance, note that sales personnel such as key account managers have the significant role of being boundary spanners between selling and buying companies, thereby establishing and working within relationships as a normal working practice. Through the work of those boundary spanning sales people, customers may even start identifying with the selling firm ([Ahearne et al., 2005](#)), in which case the boundaries between the buying and selling companies all but disappear from sight.

But, as [Callon \(1998a\)](#) claims, exchanges and markets are mutually constitutive, which indicates that even when engaging explicitly in relational activities, sales personnel are involved intimately and simultaneously in making exchanges and thereby shaping markets. To date, the sales and industrial marketing literatures have shed little light onto the sales person's *market*, rather than *relationship*, shaping

activities, contributing to a narrow view of the salesperson as boundary spanner who aims to suppress rather than perform markets.

In this paper, we question the boundary spanning concept and focus on the multiple, simultaneous and often incoherent market shaping practices of industrial sales people. Investigating ways in which relationships, markets and exchanges of goods and services are mutually constitutive and interdependent, we present a company case study from the production chemistry industry, where multiple market and relationship forms are maintained by selling personnel at the same time and often with the same company. We draw on the performativity approach to markets, in which markets are studied “as sites of multiple and often conflicting sets of practices” and attention is directed “towards the forms markets take as a result of efforts to shape them” ([Araujo, Kjellberg, & Spencer, 2008](#), p. 6).

The performativity approach conceptualizes markets as dynamic social organizations, which tie together the practices of a broad set of (material and human) actors, and which have a propensity to be open to joining in by other actors. As part of their normal and mundane activities actors shape and re-shape markets. ‘Shaping’ implies performing and adjusting exchange practices ‘on the spot’, rather than designing and overseeing some rules of a game as if from the outside. Likewise, as collective social organizations, markets can become actors in their own right and interfere in sales people's relational or client-facing activities in diverse and often unforeseen ways.

In combining the performativity perspective and concepts from sales research with our empirical data, our aims are to show that: 1. in their client-facing activities, industrial sales people actively, if sometimes unintentionally, shape the markets in which their relationships are located; 2. vice versa, markets seen as social organizations influence and interfere with the buyer–seller relationships and resist

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being ‘spanned’ and suppressed by sales people’s relational efforts; and 3. the nature of the boundaries being ‘spanned’ is more complex and dynamic than had been assumed in the boundary spanning literature in that sales people actively negotiate and shape rather than “penetrate” these (Lysonski and Johnson, 1983, p. 8), to a point where the very notion of ‘boundary spanning’ may become redundant.

2. Theoretical background

In this section, we show that many contributions to research into boundaries in business marketing, sales and organization studies take boundaries to be given or static and rarely explore the characteristics of boundaries. A rare exception is Bechky (2003), who observes that, “We need to further investigate workplace interaction in order to fully specify and explain the process by which occupational boundaries move and are shaped” (p. 721). Otherwise, we are left with the impression that stable boundaries distinguish organizations from one another, for example as company and company or company and market, or that the boundary is displaced to the edges of an emerging community or relationship. We show this tendency first in the sales and marketing literatures, with specific reference to the conceptualization of boundaries in the IMP network approach. In Section 2.2, we then trace recent developments of the boundary spanning concept in the organizational literature, but argue that these are still not able to fully account for the dynamic boundary work industrial sales people undertake. Section 2.3 introduces recent advances in market studies from a range of disciplines, which problematize the notion of boundaries in and around markets and market exchanges and open up the boundary concept for a more multifaceted perspective.

2.1. Boundary spanners in the sales and marketing literature

Research in the concept of boundary spanning began in the 1970s in management studies. In much of this early literature, organizations’ boundaries are seen as a necessary protection mechanism against environmental stresses (Leifer & Delbecq, 1978). Those individuals who operate across their organization’s boundaries and who relate their organization to its environment are called boundary spanners (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). In an influential paper from management studies, Aldrich and Herker (1977) distinguish between two main functions of boundary spanners, namely information processing and external representation. Sales and marketing personnel, in their classification, are external representers of internal policies as well as “resource disposers” (p. 220), but they also play an important role in presenting environmental information to the organization. They therefore contribute to sense-making processes both in the organization and its environment.

From the beginning, ‘role conflict’ has been important in the boundary spanning literature. ‘Role conflict’ indicates that actors are competent in two settings during an episode of interaction, having spanned a boundary successfully. Upon the concept’s adoption in sales research in the 1980s role conflict became the dominant issue for sales researchers, with the two settings typically being the buying and selling companies (Lysonski & Johnson, 1983). Research focused on the key questions of which specific skills and attributes sales personnel should acquire to perform the role of being in two organizations simultaneously and effectively, and of which organizational provisions could alleviate individuals’ role stresses and role conflicts in marketing and sales (e.g. Goolsby, 1992; Singh, 1993; Brown & Peterson, 1993; Bettencourt & Brown, 2003).

Interestingly, this literature is silent on the nature of the boundaries spanned and the specific environments that boundary spanners inhabit. Implicitly, the boundary spanning activities of sales and marketing personnel seem to equate with customer-facing activities (Singh, Verbeke, & Rhoads, 1996). More explicitly, the boundary spanning of sales people has recently been related to the concept of relational selling, implying that

sales personnel can develop relationships with counterparts in client organizations to secure sales repeatedly over time and so exclude other producers and other sales personnel from their client’s business. A point may be reached where “the boundaries between the two systems of production and consumption are dissolved” (Tzokas et al., 2001, p. 198), presumably indicating an ideal case of a boundary that has been spanned and so dissolved successfully or at least simplified greatly for its actors. Thus, the sales and marketing literature on boundary spanning has by and large taken “the existence of boundaries as given while treating boundary spanning activities as problematic” (Aldrich & Herker, 1977, p. 218).

We see the proposal of dissolving ‘prior’ market boundaries into specific episodes of intensive interaction and co-creation, and the displacement to new relationship, community or network boundaries, in the IMP literature too. Håkansson and Snehota (1989) and Håkansson and Ford (2002) argue that companies interact intensively with some counterparts and develop inter-dependence. Consequently, theories of strategy that work with a focal company’s corporate boundaries lack coherence because they depict stable bounds between a company/system and its environment rather than rich interactions between a focal company and some counterparts. Håkansson and Waluszewski (2002) and Baraldi and Waluszewski (2005) have focused on interactions occurring between different kinds of resources rather than between companies per se, to include business units and relationships as well as products and facilities. Where examining specific processes, interaction researchers have implied boundaries rather than made them problematic. Gadde, Huemer, and Håkansson (2003) and Holmen and Pedersen (2003) have under the headings of ‘strategizing’, ‘mediation’ and ‘network horizons’ examined the question of how businesses recognize and manage the means and extents of their influence.

Put simply, both the IMP literature and the boundary spanning literature in sales and marketing have cast boundaries between buyers and sellers or buying and selling companies as either present (and to be spanned) or absent (that is, successfully spanned by either individuals or firm-level relationships and networks). By contrast, as we will discuss in more detail below, Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006; 2007) and Araujo (2007) have suggested in the context of research into market studies that boundaries are constitutive of markets and of the exchange activities of actors therein. Therefore, boundaries are never fully resolved.

2.2. Relational and material dimensions of exchanges

Research into boundary spanning in management studies has recently begun to problematize the notion of boundary spanning by adopting a practice perspective. Levina and Vaast (2005, p. 339) refer to Bourdieu’s theory of practice and depict boundary spanners as “relating practices in one field to practices in another field by negotiating the meaning and terms of the relationship. They engage in building a new joint field ‘in-between’ the two fields”. They also distinguish between objectified “market-like” boundary spanning practices and relational “community-like” practices (Levina & Vaast, 2006, p. 19). In their definition, actors’ interpersonal relationships suppress the material aspects of exchanges ‘within a joint field’. Where actors engage in a joint production of objects and their meanings, the field becomes ‘community-like’ and the jointly produced object merely demarcates its boundary to the outside. The object and its material dimensions are otherwise unproblematic and a boundary spanner’s task is primarily a relational one. Working across boundaries, on the other hand, requires boundary spanners to ‘exchange’ and thus objectify a good or service that is no longer a shared object situated in communal relationships.

While we applaud Levina and Vaast’s practice perspective on boundary spanners and their emphasis on the ‘in-between’, we argue that with respect to sales personnel’s practices, their definition places insufficient emphasis on the multiplicity of forms and of overlaps the

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