MAPPING PERCEPTIONS IN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT
In studies on industrial relationships and networks within the interaction approach (see Håkansson and Snehota (1995) and Ford (1997)), a great deal of interest has been directed towards activities and resources. Equal attention has not been given to perceptions, although they are considered significant in relationships. When perceptions have been studied, a few concepts, such as satisfaction, trust and commitment have dominated (Wilson and Mummalaneni, 1986; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995). In service management in contrast, customer perceptions, for example, perceived service quality, satisfaction and value have played an important role. However, in a business setting it is more appropriate to study both the seller’s and the buyer’s perceptions. There is a growing interest in relational aspects of business in the marketing literature in general, which has resulted in increasing attention to perceptions in relationships.

Despite that it is widely recognised and emphasised in the interaction approach that relationships are dyadic to their nature, dyadic models are sparse. A dyadic model takes corresponding perceptions from both partners in a dyad into consideration instead of only focus on one firm’s view of its relation to another (Iacobucci and Zerrillo, 1996: 388). Although some studies apply a dynamic perspective on a relationship, this approach is still in its infancy. Dynamics in relationships, that is how relationships progress, is mentioned as a particular challenging and central research topic within the interaction approach (Wilson, 1995; 344) A major reason for the small number of longitudinal studies is attributed to insufficient models and methods (Miettilä and Törnroos, 1993).

This paper takes the perceptions of both parties in a business dyad into account and combines them into a perception configuration. The purpose is to introduce perception configuration as a new conceptualisation, and configuration maps as tools for analysing perceptions in dyadic studies. This map can be used to capture both the composition and the dynamics of
perception configurations. It represents a powerful and flexible tool that can be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies on perceptions. The new tool is generically applicable to studies of perceptions in dyads. Two views on relationships have influenced the study: customer relationships within the discipline of service management (Storbacka, Strandvik and Grönroos, 1994) and business relationships studied in the interaction approach. When the evolution of both parties' perceptions is studied, there is a need to understand and unfold the nature of interactions between the parties. It is argued that one way to dive under the surface and understand the dynamics of the perception configuration is to consider different units of interaction, that is interaction levels, in the relationship (Holmlund, 1996, 1997).

The configuration map can be used to analyse two parties' perceptions concerning the following issues: (Holmlund 1996, 1997)

1) to display perceptions of different types of interaction (Holmlund 1996, 1997) in a dyad. These interaction types reflect categories of activities, for example, product development, production and delivery.

2) to display and compare perceptions of interactions on different levels (Liljander and Strandvik, 1995; Holmlund, 1996, 1997). Levels refer to the interaction level categorisation described previously (actions, episodes, sequences, relationship and partner base). These levels can be used, for instance, to illustrate how perceptions of particular service encounters correspond to the perception of the whole relationship.

3) to display different types of content of perception, for instance, technical, social and economic quality dimension (Holmlund 1996, 1997). The content ranges across types and levels of interaction.

4) to display perceptions of interactions belonging to domains (Holmlund 1996, 1997), which refer, for example, to perceived process and outcome quality.
5) to display perceptions on a particular interaction level over time, for example how perceived quality of a repetitive episode changes,

6) to compare the perceptions of several individuals with each other or over time,

7) to display a focal actor's perception of several dyads in its partner base (Holmlund 1996, 1997).

Configuration maps may clearly be relevant to not only academic research but also practical relationship management.

The discussion in this paper is conceptual and displays empirical illustrations. Different application areas for the configuration map are outlined and discussed. Empirical excerpts from an extensive case study conducted in Finland of a typical industrial relationship are used to illustrate the potential of the configuration map. The buyer is a whole seller of office equipment and the seller a manufacturer of moulded metal components. The studied dyad is semi-complex in terms of operations but diverse enough to reveal diversified aspects and situations.

REFERENCES


