

Electronic Commerce and Dynamic Capabilities - The Relationship of Manufacturer and Retailer

Abstract

The competitive advantage of firms was an important topic in management and marketing research over the past decade. Forced by technical, disruptive developments manufacturers are uncertain how to behave strategically these days. For this reason, this paper focusses on the strategic option direct sales via e-Commerce. The historical development of the relationship between manufacturer and retailer are discussed. Furthermore theories like the resource-based-view and dynamic capabilities should give support while defining specific capabilities, which are indispensable in the direct sales business.

Key words: E-Commerce, Multichannel Retailing, Direct Sales, Retail, Online Marketing

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Introduction

Due to the increasing popularity of the internet, for stationary and portable end devices, the role of trade changed during the last years. The upcoming dynamics, coming from the disruptive development, hit the trade in a major extent, like nearly no other branch of industry was affected (Zentes et. al, 2011). "In addition, many industries are showing slow growth or are even stagnating in stationary retailing. The growth in sales is mainly due to the growth of e-commerce." (Fost, 2014, p.1). Thus, the environment of manufacturers and retailers of the German DIY sector is not spared from this development. In addition to the shift in revenues from stationary to digital distribution channels and the increasing relevance of new information and communication technologies, a change in consumer behavior is particularly evident. In addition, general demand for DIY store articles is decreasing, sales are decreasing and a creeping mix of retail and retail trade formats is discernible (Feinen, 2007; Graf & Schneider, 2015; Emrich & Rudolph, 2014). The focus will be on the phenomenon of hybrid consumers and the associated trend towards "smart shopping", which imply a strong brand and simultaneous price orientation of consumers and an intensive use of different sources of supply - both stationary and digital (Feinen, 2007). As a consequence of this development, which is especially intended to take into account the changed demand of the final consumer, intensive verticalization tendencies of the manufacturing companies have to be identified. The potential use of direct sales (in the form of e-commerce) allows manufacturing companies to bypass the intermediary's level, to offer and sell the brand and assortment in full breadth and depth, and thus sell goods directly to the final consumer. Accordingly, this measure

would ideally result in a significant increase in the value added of the manufacturer (Feinen, 2007; Heinemann, 2015; Rudolph & Linzmajer, 2014; Graf & Schneider, 2015).

Overall, manufacturing companies are trying not to lose the competitive advantages that have been built up in recent years, even in the digital world, and thus to maintain or, at best, even increase them.

Since the theoretical resource observation of the underlying resource facilities of a company - which is due to the "path dependence" - directly affects its strategy choice, this paper deals with the resource types and dynamic capabilities in manufacturing companies in the German DIY sector, which are used to increase the company's performance and therefore, in the best case, to generate a sustainable competitive advantage in direct sales (in the form of e-commerce) are crucial. The question to be explored in the wording:

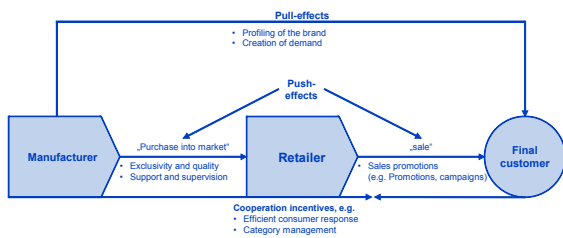
"What concrete (dynamic) capabilities do manufacturing companies in the German DIY sector have to be efficient and thus successful in direct sales (in the form of e-commerce)?"

Building on this problem, the paradigm shift in the manufacturer-trade relationship will be discussed in this paper. In particular, the digital influences, new forms of distribution and the resulting competition with previously unknown companies and their operating forms will be a major challenge for the participating companies in the German DIY sector in the coming years. Therefore, in the course of this work, the development of the manufacturer-trade relationship from an academic and economic perspective will be explained. In addition to these developments, fields of tension and special challenges are also explained.

The resource-oriented approach (resource-based view) as a parental source of

dynamic capabilities (as well as the latter approach) will be critically discussed. In addition, initial derivations - in the form of two hypotheses that contribute to the extension of the existing theory - are being made to show how companies can generate a sustainable competitive advantage even in a rapidly changing business environment (regimes of rapid change). Finally, the most important insights, limits as well as possible related research opportunities are named and summarized.

The Changing Manufacturer-Trader Relationship



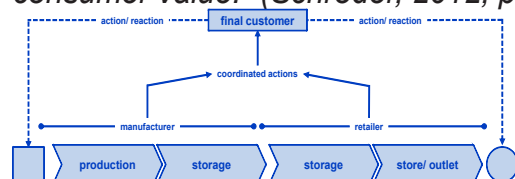
“A special feature of the vertical cooperation of dealers and manufacturers compared to the cooperation of manufacturing companies is the positioning of trade at the interface between production and consumption. Trade is thus part of a system for distributing manufacturers products to consumers” (Lammers, 2012, p.75). This fact is illustrated by Meffert et al. also, as the figure opposite illustrates. The manufacturers were for a long time dependent on the trade and at the same time suffered great substitution fears. The distribution of tasks was clearly structured and clearly distributed. The manufacturer produces goods and then transfers them (business to business) to the dealer with the order to carry out the sale to the final consumer, end consumer or consumer (business to consumer). In other words: “The manufacturer produces, the merchant sells the goods, the market coordinates between these two stages” (Ahlert, 2001, p. 333).

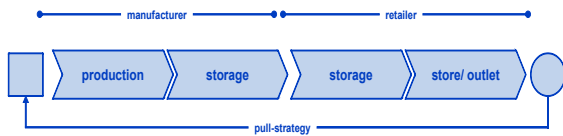
This relationship constellation also had clear structures for a long time in the German DIY sector. The strong private label brands OBI, Bauhaus, Hornbach etc. held dominant positions, especially in the perception of the ultimate consumer. However, manufacturers’ brands were often secondary to perception in this situation. The dealer did not let this happen any differently. Especially in the last 10 years, the trading world experiences - due to the already described phenomena - big changes, which promote a special challenge for the manufacturer-trade relationship.

The beginning of the modern manufacturer-trade relationship represents the theory of Efficient Consumer Response (ECR). This concept is considered to be the successor to the Quick Consumer Response, which gained great importance towards the end of the last century (Seifert, 2006; Schröder 2001). Theoretically, this concept, which focuses on the American textile industry, has already optimized the flow of goods and information between manufacturers and dealers in order to achieve effects in the cost structure of logistics, inventory management and capital commitment (see Ahlert & Borchert 2000, p.11).

The basic principle of ECR is also very well described by the following lines:

“The parts of this concept are not new, supply chain management is about logistics, category management is about marketing. Rather, what is new is that manufacturers and retailers coordinate their processes and tools in the shared value chain to reduce inefficiencies and increase consumer value.” (Schröder, 2012, p.29).





With this quote, Schröder emphasizes another important finding: Manufacturers and retailers are trying to come closer together due to changes in the environment. Working together, they define “new” terminology to make the understanding of individual processes and stages of value creation efficient. The suggested form of cooperation has far-reaching differences in this theory. As shown in Figure 2, the original manifestation of the manufacturer-trade relationship largely relates to the fact that the relevant decisions are all those of the two main players - the manufacturer and the distributor. Marketing theory often refers to product-oriented marketing (see Meffert et al., 2015, p.25; Mattmüller & Tunder, 2004, p. 165; Schröder, 2012, p.44). In contrast to that, the customer-oriented marketing approach stands, which is illustrated in figure three. Quite clearly, here the consumer takes center stage here. With this focus, optimally coordinated actions and processes of manufacturers and distributors must follow to fully meet the ultimate demand of the end user. “In this context, one often speaks of a change from the traditional order-driven system of selling into the market to the process-integrated, consumer demand-driven system in which the consumer’s demand behavior determines the entire value chain between the retailer and the manufacturer” (Mattmüller & Tunder, 2004, p. 165)

Sytch and Gulati (2008) describe the effect of ECR in the following terms:

“One is indeed value appropriation, in which each company’s performance is determined by the pool of value created by the partnership. But to capture value, companies first need to create it, and this is where the second process comes into

play: value creation. In other words, what matters for a company’s performance in a buyer-supplier relationship is not just the share of the pie it gets, but so how big the entire pie is “(Sytch & Gulati, 2008, p. 12).

In their article “Creating Value Together”, the two economists point to the prospects of a successful manufacturer-trade relationship. In doing so, they emphasize that not only one’s own value created is decisive for the success of the cooperation, but much more the product that emerges from the partnership. Especially in electronic commerce, there are only a few limits to this success. However, this situation is counteracted by the situation described above, in which “... commercial companies are today usually in a position to enforce their will against the resistance of the manufacturer” (Lammers, 2014, p. 83). Bieber (2004) notes, “Rather, the conquest of a dominant position by retailers seems to have contributed to the development of a culture of co-operation diametrically opposed to a transition from an antagonistic co-operation relationship to the creation of so-called win-win situations” (p.10). Manufacturers are trying to escape this dominant position with great motivation. The dependence of manufacturers on trade, as a link to the final consumer, is very pronounced, especially in the German DIY sector. Thus, individual companies begin to examine possibilities of direct sales – i.e. a sales opportunity by bypassing the trade - in the form of online trading and occasionally implement them.

Conflict Causes Between Manufacturer and Trade

“Although manufacturers and retailers basically have the same motivation in the distribution system, and that the most profitable sales of products to consumers and their behavior are fundamentally geared toward achieving this overall goal, they do not automatically have a compatible

target system despite this common overall objective” (Lammers, 2012).

This finding is also confirmed by Mattmüller & Tunder (2004, p. 125) and Ahlert (2005, p. 65). As causes of conflict in this context, several goal divergences are observed. For example, the trader wants “as much demand as possible in his own establishment” and “the sale of products from a particular manufacturer”, whereas the manufacturer focuses on “selling as many own products as possible” and “selling products through a specific retailer” (Lammers, 2012, P.97). Summing up these divergent objectives with the already indicated asymmetric distribution of power and the associated imbalance of information, result in conflict areas in the assortment, price, distribution and communication policy (see Zentes & Swoboda, 2005, p. 1067 ff.; Barth et al., 2005, p. 171 ff.; Morschett, 2006, p. 527 ff.).

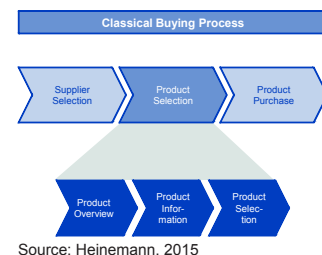
The described causes of conflict in the manufacturer-trade relationship are further exacerbated by the dynamics and changes in digitization. Therefore, this topic is dealt with in more detail in the following chapter.

Impact of Digitization and Online Commerce on Manufacturers-Trade Relationship

With just under € 47 billion in annual sales, e-commerce - after cautious development at the beginning of the century - reached its temporary peak in 2015. The development in Figure four shows that the digital distribution of goods and merchandise has always developed strongly positively and crisis-resistant in recent years. Heinemann (2015) even speaks of the “triumph of online commerce” (p.1). The special feature of the growing distribution channel e-Commerce is the redesign of the purchase process of the final consumers. “In addition to the increasing relevance of new information and communication technologies, there is also a changing

demand and consumer behavior of the final consumers” (Feinen, 2007, p.2). This poses an enormous challenge for manufacturers and retailers. Provided that the central interest “... of each customer is to find a product in his buying process that optimally satisfies his needs” (Heinemann, 2015, p. 45) he was looking for the right supplier in the classic buying process. In the second step, of the product selection, the customer was able to gather all product information that was important to him and ask the sales staff before finally buying the product in the last step. Figure five illustrates this process. The new buying process differs from its classic (predecessor) model by a serious shift. Thus, it is no longer the supplier in the first phase of the process, but rather the product, the brand or the manufacturer. Today, even before the selection of the provider, information, acceptance and popularity of products are searched and checked. The product purchase and thus the provider often result casually. “Even if the product is not purchased in an online store, the Internet is the most credible medium for buying decisions for most of its users” (Heinemann, 2015, p. 46). This assumption is reinforced by a variety of studies. Here is an example of a study, according to which 97% of all German households with Internet connection “... first research the Web before they make a purchase decision” (Heinemann, 2015, p.47; Schneller, 2009, p. 28),

This development also shows that the former reference point “dealer” is ultimately substituted by the product, the brand or the manufacturer name in the search field during the information search



Source: Heinemann, 2015

in the digital world of the final consumer. Not only in the phase of information search, i.e. the product selection, but also in the subsequent phase, the supplier selection significantly changes. Where only a few years ago in the German DIY sector, the formerly stationary trading companies such as OBI, Bauhaus, Hornbach, etc. divided the market, new competitors are entering the market today. If one remembers symbolically the quotation from Sytch and Gulati at this point, the maximum success of a manufacturer-trade relationship can only be as great as the market (in the example of the cake) allows. When pure players such as Amazon, GartenXXL, eBay, etc. are pushing into the market, competition and crowding out will result. According to this, changes and adjustments on the part of existing manufacturer-trade relationships must be worked out in order not to lose existing market shares.

Finally, the following quotation by the St. Gallen economist Schögel confirms and summarizes the facts and findings of the preceding lines:

“Apparently, few companies have been able to successfully co-operate vendor-to-retail relationships. Deadlocked distribution rituals, a tactical conflict management and disputes in the vertical division of labor lead to the fact that partnership behavior is propagated, but only in very few cases really a professional cooperation management can be found” (Schögel, 2006, p. 19).

Theoretical Frame of Reference

The resource-theoretical approach, often referred to as Resource-Based View (abbreviated to RBV) in Anglo-language usage, originated with Penrose in 1959 with the work “The Theory of the Growth of the Firm”. She is the first scientist to combine two approaches. It defines companies of that time as both an “administrative entity” and an “accumulation of productive resources” (Cavusgil et al., 2007). From

this, the resource-theoretical approach attempts to explain conditions under which the respective companies can generate a sustainable competitive advantage on the basis of their own (internal) resources and capabilities (Barreto, 2010, p. 258). Here, resources are referred to as “stocks of available factors that are owned or controlled by the firm,” while capabilities are defined as “... a firm’s capacity to deploy resources, usually in combination, using organizational processes, to effect a desired end” (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993, p. 35). These resources in the tangible sense or mentioned abilities are primarily characterized in this approach by the following properties (see Zahn et al., 2000, p.50 f.; Barreto, 2010, p.259; Barney, 1991; etc.)

- Relative rarity
- Non-transferability
- Limited or expensive imitability
- Durability

To further develop this statically characterized and therefore highly limited approach, Teece and colleagues began to conceptualize the concept of dynamic capabilities towards the end of the last century. Teece, Pisano and Shuen define these dynamic skills in 1997 as “... the firm’s ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (p. 516). The large focus on the external and simultaneously rapidly changing environment of the company led the scientists to use the word “dynamic” (1997, p. 515). Teece extended the resource-theoretical approach with a focus on the market and strategy of the company. The skills, the second word in the definition of the approach, are to represent the challenge of strategic management, internal and external skills, resources and functional competencies to adopt, introduce into the company or even re-form to meet the new challenges of changing the environment

sustained growth (Teece et al., 1997, p. 515; Cavusgil et al., 2007, p. 161). In contrast to the resource-theoretical approach, the competitive advantage thus arises not only from the simple possession of rare and difficult to imitate resources, but also from the (strategic) combination as well as the compilation and configuration of these resources (Cavusgil et al., 2007, p. 161). This is to respond to changes in the market or such changes are generated in the best case. Particularly in this context, the term “best practice” played a very important role in strategic management (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000, p. 1117). Within the dynamic skills approach, “learning” is also of great importance, which was not considered in the previous resource-theoretical approach (Cavusgil, 2007, p. 162). Teece et al. here denote “learning” as a “process by which repetition and experimentation enable tasks to be performed better and quicker” (1997, p. 520). For representatives of this approach, these organizational processes and, ultimately, routines are the source of competitive advantage and thus the success of a business venture. Based on the already mentioned “path dependence”, it is according to Teece et al. true to the motto “history matters”, it is also possible to fathom the company’s success and competitive advantages. As a last and yet very important point, the scientists mention the “assets” of a company. Hereby, technological, complementary, financial, call-related, structural, institutional and market-dependent assets are discussed. In particular, to accommodate the technical developments of recent years in this approach, Teece expanded its definition of dynamic capabilities in 2007, calling it either a company’s ability to

- a) identify and shape opportunities in the market (opportunities) and strengths in the company, or
- b) seize opportunities on the market, or
- c) to ensure competitiveness by

increasing, combining, protecting or reorganizing the company’s intangible and tangible assets.

Especially for the German DIY sector, which - as described - has undergone major changes in recent years and will be able to do so in the years to come, the dynamic approach of a company can provide valuable insights. This can also make a major contribution to management research and marketing research. Manufacturers in the industry should not be examined as in other approaches as a black box, but also in the market and strategy perspective. Accordingly, the further part of the paper will discuss which adapted, educated, etc. dynamic capabilities and their optimal configuration can achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in direct sales (in the form of e-commerce). A particular focus here is on the question to what extent the dynamic capabilities of a company itself should be developed or sourced or transferred by external partners.

Development of the Theory

Following the theory’s foundation in the previous section of this paper, hypotheses and assumptions are now formulated to broaden the company’s dynamic capabilities approach. In order not to unnecessarily increase the scope of this paper, only two hypotheses are formulated at this point, which relate to the transformation of existing processes/ assets and customer feedback/ recommendation marketing.

In order to meet the changing customer requirements, transformations of existing processes are necessary. Especially among the manufacturers of the German DIY sector, which are characterized by a strong midsize, the marketing function is true to the instrumental marketing approach (see Mc Carthy) in many cases rather downstream and thus separated from the functional area of sales. As a result, marketing often

experiences equating with subtasks of communication such as advertising and sales promotion in the broadest sense (see Meffert, 2015, p.9; Mattmüller, 2012, p.44). In business processes in the context of e-commerce interfacing problems often arise, which were already present before the emergence of digital media and sales channels. In order to prevent this problem and to ensure the greatest possible customer orientation, the individual marketing sub-functions - preparation, initiation, completion, realization - should experience a stronger process orientation according to the integrated marketing concept. A maximum customer orientation of a company in this case should lead to trust, and ultimately loyalty on the part of the customer. These primary outcomes result in the economic success of a company (Esch & Wicke, 2001, p. 43; Mattmüller, 2012, p. 61). Thanks to the marketing process orientation and the integration of the organizational division, sales companies in the industry can also live up to the newly designed consumer journey, i.e. the path between the first purchase idea and the final click - as a purchase transaction (Heinemann, 2015, p. 69).

H1: Manufacturers of the German DIY sector can achieve greater customer orientation and therefore process advantages over competitors by integrating the organizational areas of marketing and sales.

“When purchasing decisions are made, consumers are increasingly looking for information about products and services on the Internet” (Lis & Korchmar, 2015, p.1). Referral marketing plays an important role in this, which has gained importance in recent years, especially in science (Helm, 2000, O’Reilly, 2005). “In the age of Web 2.0, the success of products and services is increasingly no longer determined by reports and advertising in traditional media, but significantly depends

on the online comments and ratings of like-minded consumers” (Lis & Korchmar, 2015, p. 2, Smith et al., 2007). Derived from the classic word-of-mouth (German: word-of-mouth) this form of customer rating is called electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM). Henning-Thurau et al. (2004), for example, defines eWoM as “... any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customer about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 39). This new kind of customer feedback and the associated transparency can change important assets of a company, such as brand image, customer satisfaction, etc., which are seen as call-related assets in the approach of a company’s dynamic capabilities. Furthermore, these assessments provide important insights and information that must be understood as a kind of co-creation and included in the innovation process of a company.

H2: Manufacturing companies in the German DIY industry can increase call-related assets by strategically evaluating customer ratings.

Summary

Based on the current balance of power between manufacturers and retailers, the distribution of goods over the Internet for the German retail landscape is a real paradigm shift. The science has already found a variety of findings in recent years, which were presented and discussed holistically in the course of this essay.

Where, at the beginning of this century, Quick Consumer Response and later the concept of Efficient Consumer Response (ECR) were important in the analysis of marketing theory, digital developments as well as social changes in the study of science were intensified in recent years involved. Consequently, this paper discusses the dynamic capabilities of a company using

the example of the manufacturers of the German DIY sector. In addition to a sound basis of the theoretical frame of reference, two hypotheses have been formulated in the further course, which contribute to the further development of this approach. These should be expanded and further investigated empirically. Furthermore, the focus could be changed from a national to an international level to gain further insights.

Building on the first publication by Teece et al. on the subject of “dynamic skills” in 1997, economists today discuss as vehemently as before, in the resource-theoretical approach, whether and to what extent this concept has a legitimacy to be called perfect management theory. Nevertheless, in the past few years, this approach has led to a large number of empirical research projects. Further points of departure could be for the approach of the dynamic abilities in the research and determination of certain enterprise environments, in which the approach is of great relevance. “Empirical studies should explicitly compare the effects of different dynamic capabilities in two or more distinct environmental conditions (e.g., different industries or different periods of time)” (Barreto, 2010, p. 276). Furthermore, it is necessary to determine for which type of business dynamic capabilities may be most valuable.

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