The Role of Knowledge Management in Industrial Marketing: A Longitudinal Study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role that knowledge management plays in making industrial marketing sustainable. In order to examine sustainability over time, a longitudinal study has been carried out. Three multinational companies, Atlas Copco, SKF and Volvo are followed from their inception, in 1873, 1907 and 1927 to present time. Due to the long time span involved most of the empirical data collection is carried out in the form of internal and external document studies. The data is analysed using the constant comparative technique from the grounded theory approach. A framework combining knowledge management and industrial marketing is proposed. The research has interesting implications for the scientific understanding of industrial marketing, as the field of knowledge management has not been previously integrated and many aspects of marketing are knowledge driven processes. Moreover, the framework that is proposed should be useful for managers of industrial companies in their efforts of making their marketing more sustainable.

Keywords: Industrial Marketing, Knowledge Management, Longitudinal Studies, Relationship Marketing

DOI: 10.4018/IJKSS.2015040102
INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Industrial marketing started to develop as an independent field in marketing in the 1970s since traditional marketing theory, which mainly had been developed based on consumer market research, was found to be largely irrelevant for the intricacies of business-to-business marketing (Lagrosen & Svensson, 2006). In industrial marketing, the inter-organisational approach highlights the role of interaction and networks (Jansson, 2006). Thus, marketing in industrial markets usually take the form of relationship marketing (Gummesson, 1999) involving many parties in complex networks (Gummesson, 2004). In the relationships between the companies in the network, handling of uncertainties and abilities is crucial (Ford et al., 1998). Consequently, knowledge may be the most important asset for the successful marketing on industrial markets. This means that those organisations who consistently embed knowledge management principles in their practice outperform those that do not. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role that knowledge management plays in making industrial marketing sustainable. A longitudinal study is a good option to understand the role of knowledge to deliver sustainability over time. Thus, we have chosen to study a number of companies who have been active for a long time in order to have an insight into what knowledge management has meant for their success.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, very short reviews of the fields of industrial marketing and knowledge management follow. Second, the methodology for the study is presented followed by the findings. Subsequently, a discussion section is included and finally some conclusions end the paper.

INDUSTRIAL MARKETING

In the latter part of the 20th century, novel marketing theories appeared which challenged the previous transaction-based marketing dominance (Lagrosen & Svensson, 2006). The first, which concerned marketing in industrial markets, and the second that regarded services, both started investigating the peculiarities of their fields. One aspect that is common to these two lines of development is the significance of relationships. This led to the advent of relationship marketing (Gummesson, 1999).

Industrial marketing was originally considered rather straightforward. Research, in particular by the IMP group, highlighted the intricacies of industrial marketing and it has become an area of active research. The interaction approach implies that customers and suppliers are considered active partners who seek, select, develop, manage and evaluate their relationship (Jansson, 2006). This means that handling relationships is companies’ main task. This approach also shows the importance of business relationships in the broader context of business networks. In a network the role and form of marketing has become ambiguous as all interactions have implications for
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