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How and why managers use conceptual devices in business-to-business research

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to analyze how and why managers adopt and use business-to-business (B2B) research.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through participant observations, focus groups and interviews in three organizations that had used a certain conceptual model from B2B research.

Findings – The study suggests that managers use B2B research in an action-oriented, flexible and dynamic manner. Such conceptual or translational use is characterized by managers' creative translation of the research to match the problems they are facing at that particular time.

Research limitations/implications – This study suggests that researchers and managers are on equal footing, and can contribute to one another in an active and creative way.

Practical implications – Through translating research into their specific context, managers can find a new spectrum of research usage in their organization, but can also contribute to research in an interactive and creative way.

Originality/value – This study gives empirical examples for how and why a certain piece of B2B research has been used by managers in three organizations. Moreover, this study contributes to existing models relating to marketing use by giving examples of the active translation process in which managers adopt the research to their specific challenges.

Keywords Managers, Business, Business-to-business marketing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The limited literature about managerial relevance is characterized by the use of polarizing and sweeping rhetorical statements, and is directed either toward a critique or legitimization of a particular image of the relationship between scientific theorizing and managers and their activities. Moreover, the discussion is often based on implicit assumptions of how the topic of managerial relevance should be defined. As Jaworski (2011, p. 211) noted:

[...] the concept of managerial relevance operates in practice as a Rorschach test; everyone seems to have an idea of what it means when they see it, but it is a highly personal interpretation.

An implicit assumption in the literature is an overly simplified view of how managers actually use marketing research. The most prevalent perspective of marketing research use is framed in terms of inputs and outputs (Rich, 1977), according to which the researcher is the producer of research and the manager is the passive consumer; for example, where a manager uses market research to decide whether to launch a product in a certain market. The research is either used or rejected.

This simplified view assumes that the marketing manager is occupied with solving problems with the support of adequate

research. Moreover, the researcher is seen as producing rational and adequate solutions to those problems. This view not only assumes that the process of the use of scientific research is linear, and that the questions that research aims to answer are well-known and defined in the same manner by everyone in the organization but also that there is an objective and precise answer to those questions (Cornelissen and Lock, 2005).

Such an instrumental view on the use of scientific research overlooks the fact that the use of science in an organization can involve a complex behavioral process. Cornelissen and Lock (2005, p. 168) argued that a linear view on the use of scientific research is especially inept for the following reasons:

- It overlooks how managers' knowledge derived from experience underlies or influences the use of academic research.
- It offers a static cross-sectional view of reality that is marginally relevant to the dynamic and action-oriented setting in which managers operate.
- It fails to account for contextual factors, situational constraints and personal values, which all are parts of managerial knowledge.
- It overlooks indirect but broadly important conceptual, educational and political use of science.
- It ignores the way in which academic knowledge is translated and integrated with managers' knowledge.

Therefore, there is a need for a more expansive understanding of scientific knowledge use that goes beyond viewing scientists

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as producers and managers as passive consumers. In other words, there is a need for more empirical studies and descriptive accounts regarding how and why marketing managers actually use scientific knowledge.

The present study is based on the author’s dissertation, titled “Business Manoeuvring – a Grounded Theory of Complex Selling Processes” (from now on referred to as the BM model), at Stockholm School of Economics in October 2009 (in November 2011, the study was published in *Management Decision*). Through the business media, the study attracted the attention of managers in Sweden. Consequently, many managers in Sweden were confronted by this new theory of selling processes, and some organizations did some attempt to use it in their everyday activities.

The present study analyzes the way in which the BM model, or conceptual device, was used and the managerial relevance it contributed. The aim of the study is to provide an empirical example of “how” and “why” this piece of industrial marketing research was used by managers, and discuss the managerial relevance of the model.

Extant literature

Before discussing managers’ use of scientific knowledge, we must address the question of how knowledge utilization is defined. As Menon and Varadarajan (1992) argued, there is a great diversity in the literature regarding how knowledge utilization is conceptualized. For example, John and Martin (1984, p. 173) defined knowledge use as the research output “used directly to guide behavior and make decisions” or the extent to which information can “reduce uncertainty in decisions” (Patton, 1978, p. 50). Larsen (1985, p. 143) emphasized that, when analyzing utilization, the focus should be on including “organizational, sociomical and attitudinal factors in addition to the information”. Emphasizing the process perspective of knowledge utilization, Rich (1997, p. 17) defined utilization as “a process – a series

of events, which may or may not lead to a specific action by a particular actor at a given point of time”.

When discussing the use of industrial marketing research, the present study draws on the topology presented by Larsen and Werner (1981) of utilization and non-utilization, in which utilization is characterized by:

- complete implementation of the information presented;
- adaptation of information;
- partial use of information; or
- steps that have been taken toward implementation, although full implementation has not occurred.

Non-utilization is conceptualized as:

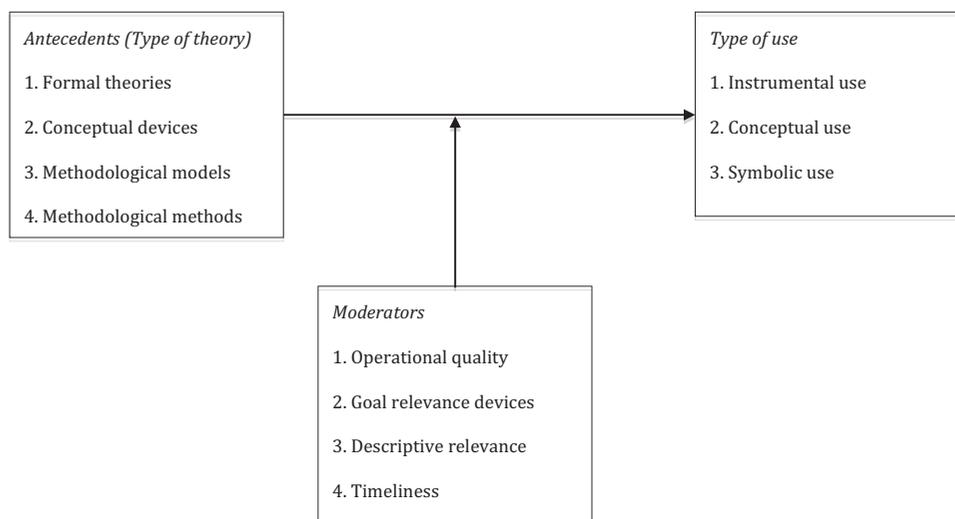
- information considered by a potential user, but then rejected;
- information with which nothing is done; and
- circumstances in which implementation of the information has not occurred, but is under consideration.

Viewing use as an outcome, rather than a process, involves a more linear perspective (Rich, 1997). Cornelissen and Lock (2005, p. 168) argued that such a linear and scientist-centric view is inept, as it overlooks, for example, the way that managers experience situational factors, while managers’ action-oriented settings affect the use of scientific knowledge. As described earlier, this view on the scientific utilization of research leaves questions like “how?” and “why?” unanswered, along with how managers actually use academic theory. To answer those questions, we have to free ourselves from “the shackles of so-called input/output analysis” (Rich, 1997, p. 23).

A suggested framework

An alternative perspective on science utilization considers the process by which research is utilized as “a complex behavioral process” (Beyer and Trice, 1982). Emphasizing the process dimension, Cornelissen and Lock (2005) suggested a framework for the use of scientific research that includes antecedents, moderators and theory use (Figure 1).

Figure 1 A suggested framework for the use of scientific research



Source: Cornelissen and Lock (2005)

Antecedents

Regarding antecedents, the question arises as to what kind of theories can be subjected to potential use from the manager's perspective. Cornelissen and Lock (2002) argued that there is a fundamental difference between managers' and academics' search for knowledge, as managers focus on single problems and on designing action plans and strategies by which to deal with these problems. On the other hand, academics focus on relationships among concepts, rather than on detailed descriptions of certain phenomena. This difference led Myers *et al.* (1979) to distinguish between "context-specific" and "context-free" knowledge, where the former is focused on improving specific business situations, and the latter is more abstract and general in nature; that is, it consists of what are often referred to as academic or scientific theories.

Such academic theories – or context-free knowledge – include both substantial and methodological theories; Charnes *et al.* (1985, p. 97) conceptualized the former as aiming for "understanding", while the latter aims at "understanding for use". More specifically, substantial theories often contain declarative knowledge about certain phenomena, object and events. In social science, substantive theory has been defined as:

[. . .] the formulation of concepts and their interrelation into a set of hypotheses for a given substantive area – such as patient care, gang behavior, or education – based on research in that area (Glaser, 1965, p. 5).

In the area of philosophy, substantive theory has been defined as "theory that provides an explanatory, constructive, and systematic view of a rich, significant, and fundamental subject-matter" (Sher, 2004, p. 5). In the field of business-to-business (B2B) marketing, such a substantive theory can aim to produce knowledge of a specific field of interest, such as industrial networks, or conceptualizations of certain aspects of sales management.

According to Cornelissen and Lock (2002), a substantive theory can be further divided into two, either:

- 1 a more formal substantive theory such as demand and utility theory, or image and attitude theory; or
- 2 conceptual devices such as the marketing mix and the concept of relationship marketing.

Astley and Zammuto (1992, p. 444) argued that such conceptual devices can actually be of great value for managers, and stated that:

[. . .] the two spheres (practise and academics) are linked in a manner that call into question the wisdom of de-emphasizing abstract, highly general theory in favour of empirically concrete, directly applicable research.

If substantive theories consist of factual and conceptual knowledge of certain marketing phenomena, methodological theories are based on knowledge that aims to produce certain results; they are "action oriented". These theories can be divided into methodological models, and methodological methods (Cornelissen and Lock, 2002). Methodological models consist of procedural knowledge that aims to promote concrete marketing action, such as models and methods for assembling and utilizing market data, while methodological methods are quantitative methods for statistical sampling and data interference (Charnes *et al.*, 1985).

Moderators

Although marketing theory use is dependent on the type of theory that is produced, Cornelissen and Lock (2002) suggested that certain factors can either increase or decrease the use of a particular theory. These factors are: "operational quality", "goal relevance", "descriptive relevance" and "timeliness". Operational quality refers to the extent to which a theory provides concrete and actionable implications. Goal relevance is related to whether the outcome variables of a theory correspond to factors that managers want to change or influence. Descriptive relevance refers to a theory's ability to actually accommodate relevant phenomena in its scope. Finally, timeliness refers to the actual timing; that is, the extent to which the availability of a theory for managers comes at the right time for them to deal with practical problems and challenges.

Theory use

Instrumental use implies that the research is used directly to solve a problem. Much of the discussion in marketing regarding the use of research is based on this perspective on direct and instrumental use (Deshpande and Zaltman, 1982). Rich (1977, p. 200) emphasized that instrumental use occurs when information is employed "for decision-making or problem-solving purposes". In a broader sense, as Schön (1983, p. 21) argued, the concept of instrumental use is an expression of a "technical rationality" that has actually shaped our view of the concept of professionalism itself, as professionalism presupposes "instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique".

According to Menon and Varadarajan (1992), an example of instrumental use is when a decision to introduce a new product is based on market-research findings and recommendations. Several researchers have argued that direct instrumental use is quite rare (Myers *et al.*, 1979; Varadarajan, 2003; Cornelissen and Lock, 2002, 2005; Cornelisson, 2000). However, it seems that there is a higher probability of direct and instrumental use when managers request information for a specific decision or task. In Deshpande and Zaltman's (1982) study, managers found research information critical when it was solicited by the users to provide input in relation to whether to add, modify or delete a product from a product line. In such cases, the actual design of the research project serves an instrumental end.

Cornelissen and Lock (2005) argued that methodological theories can be used in a direct and instrumental manner for marketing problems to a larger extent than substantive theories. In this respect, the shortcomings of substantive theories are explained by the fact that these theories are often formulated on a higher level of abstraction, and not as easily transformed into an operational form.

However, the philosophical underpinnings of the instrumental use of research can be questioned (Schön, 1983; Cornelissen, 2000; Rich, 1997). Cornelissen (2000) argued that this perspective can be criticized from at least four angles. First, managers today are facing complexity in both tasks and environment, which indicates that it can be difficult for them to find a perfect and objective solution. Second, there is an implicit assumption in the instrumental view that practical problems

manifest, and that everyone can see them in a similar manner. Third, there is an assumed consensus regarding objectives in organizations. Fourth the instrumental model of the use of scientific research can be criticized, as it depreciates other kinds of knowledge and knowledge use, such as intuition and more experienced-based knowledge, in its search for the “right” and “objective” answer to a clear and specific question.

According to Rich (1977, p. 200), conceptual use refers to “influencing a policy maker’s thinking about an issue without putting information to any specific, documentable use”. Cornelissen (2000, p. 319) stated that:

[. . .] in this approach, it is generally assumed that science offers ideas, problem definitions, and interpretive schemes as a set of intellectual tools available to the manager in understanding and anticipating real-world phenomena”.

Instrumental use is immediate and directly observable, while conceptual use is delayed and has a diffuse impact, and is, therefore, less readily observable (Rich, 1997). In that sense, conceptual use is aimed more at general enlightenment (Cornelissen and Lock, 2005).

Conceptual devices also offer managers considerable scope and flexibility with which to redefine, select and reinterpret substantive theory to be used in a variety of circumstances. As argued by Astley and Zammuto (1992, p. 453), “conceptual utilization of organization science concepts implies that managers use their inside knowledge of an organizational setting to interpret and apply general theoretical ideas”. Because conceptual use is less direct than instrumental use, it enables users to alter, combine and reinterpret the research in a range of circumstances (Beyer and Trice, 1982).

As noted by Cornelissen and Lock (2005), the reason for the inability to use a substantive theory instrumentally is due to its more abstract character and the fact that it is often detached from the everyday contingencies of the manager. However, as this detachment is especially notable with regard to formal substantive theories, conceptual devices can be used conceptually, even though they ignore the particularities and complexities of the managers’ everyday activities.

However, like instrumental use, conceptual use has been criticized because of its implied presumption that it involves a one-way relationship between research and practice. A different version of the conceptual model of the use of scientific research is the so-called “translation model” (Cornelissen, 2000).

While the conceptual model of use emphasizes a flexible use of scientific knowledge that enlightens managers, Cornelissen (2000) argued that there is a translation model of scientific use that looks at managers as having practical-based knowledge, and not being dependent on knowledge from researchers. According to this perspective, the researcher and managers are on more of an “equal footing”, and managers translate research ideas and adapt them to existing visions. This resembles what Schön (1983) described as the “reflective practitioner”, who interprets ideas into existing cognitive schemes and uses them for concrete cases in practice.

If research is not used flexibly or interpreted into existing schemes (as denoted by the conceptual and translation model of the use of scientific research), and is instead directly and deliberately taken out of context and used by managers, this is referred to as symbolic use (Menon and Varadarajan, 1992;

Beyer and Trice, 1982; Cornelissen and Lock, 2002). In this model of scientific use, research is used for its symbolic value to legitimate the actions of the manager. Menon and Varadarajan (1992) argued that symbolic use not only takes research out of context but also oversimplifies findings or ignores assumptions that might weaken the point the manager wants to make. Brownlie and Saren (1997, p. 150) elaborated upon this more “partisan” method of science, arguing that:

Marketing managers are typically very adept at using this conceptual vocabulary to provide interviewees with persuasive accounts of their activities as marketing managers. In that sense they are authors too.

Cornelissen and Lock (2005) argued that methodological theories and models lend themselves to symbolic use to a lesser extent compared to conceptual devices. This is due to the fact that the data in these models are rather more explicit and examinable than the abstract expressions found in conceptual devices and other substantive theories.

Data collection

The data for this study were collected from three different organizations that have used the BM model. These organizations included a global information technology (IT) organization, a Swedish veterinary firm and a sales consultancy firm. Data were collected from >100 hours of participant observations in situations where the model was used either externally or internally within these organizations. In addition, five focus-group sessions were undertaken, each of which lasted for between three and eight hours. The purpose of these interactive sessions was to obtain additional information regarding the use of the model. Finally, 10 interviews, each of which lasted approximately one-two hours, were conducted with various members of the three organizations. All data collection was conducted between 2010 and 2013.

Before proceeding and providing empirical examples of the BM model’s use, a short summary of the model is provided below.

A brief summary of the BM model

The original study argued that that previous “linear” models of the selling process, most of which are based on the so-called “seven steps of selling”, (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) are deficient in that they fail to capture the dynamic nature of contemporary B2B sales processes; in particular, linear models fail to recognize that several dimensions coexist simultaneously in contemporary selling processes. In contrast, the proposed model recognizes four concurrent dimensions:

- 1 formality and organizational issues (captured in the category of “business standardization”);
- 2 collaboration at the organizational level (represented by the category of “business fraternization”);
- 3 relationships at the personal level (captured in the category of “personalization”); and
- 4 concern about costs and risks (represented by the category of “probationary business rationalization”).

Moreover, the judicious management of these four dimensions (captured in the core category of “business maneuvering”) is what actually characterizes the “real-life” management of contemporary B2B selling processes.

Case 1 – A global IT company

Background

This global organization was founded in the 1980s and soon became Sweden's largest IT consultancy firm. According to several managers, the organization achieved such rapid growth through its founder's ability to build long-term and profitable relationships with its customers. Since 2008, when the company was acquired, it has been a global organization and currently employs 72,000 people in 70 countries. Due to this development, several managers felt that the profile of the original company as a partner that collaborated with customers in long-term relationships had been lost to some extent, or at least was no longer communicated effectively to the market.

Contributing to this "lost profile" was the fact that the type of businesses the managers were pursuing was different than in the 1980s. The current focus was mostly on large outsourcing deals with durations of several years. In addition, these business projects were characterized by rather formal tendering processes and, within those complex business projects, managers often found themselves at "arm's-length" distance from the purchasing department in the customer organization.

This development was often a source of frustration for the managers because, without such closeness and collaboration, they felt that the basis for a successful project was missing and the risk of failure was high.

How the firm used the BM model

Facing this reality, the managers in the IT organization felt a need to communicate and emphasize what they perceived as the most critical component of complex business deals; that is, collaboration and dialog.

One of the core dimensions in the BM model is the category describing collaboration at the organizational level (represented by the category of "business fraternization"). When the managers in the IT company encountered the BM model, they felt that it provided them with a framework for communicating the important ingredients of a successful business project.

To get this message across, the marketing director invited potential customers, and 60 of the company's largest existing customers, to seminars at which the author of this paper presented the BM model and discussed it with the invited participants. These seminars gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on what constitutes a successful business project, and what actions contribute to such success, thereby giving them an integrated view of critical points in an outsourcing project, with an emphasis on the dimension of "business fraternization". In other words, the BM model helped emphasize the importance of a collaborative relationship based on mutual understanding and respect.

These seminars were attended not only by existing and potential customers but also the managers working with the company's most important accounts. Therefore, the BM model was introduced as a framework to internal staff, as well as being used as a common point of reference and an integrated view of these processes. The marketing director explained:

The response from the participants was very positive [. . .] everyone in the room did get the message, if we do not trust each other and collaborate, there will be no winners [. . .].

After the seminars, the BM model was also used internally when discussing business processes. As one manager put it, complex outsourcing processes involve myriad situation-specific components that the selling team must take into consideration. In such a setting, a common internal framework or language is crucial in terms of effectively moving the team members forward in the process, and for them to communicate their experiences from the field to their manager. The manager summarized this as follows:

Through the BM model, we had four principles that simplified all critical components in a complex outsourcing project. That simplicity made it easier for all of us to learn, communicate and prepare for coming events [. . .] We could say, do we have the right personnel on board in this project to tackle personalization effectively? Or how do we establish business fraternization with this customer?

Case 2 – A veterinary firm

Background

The veterinary firm is a state authority of command assigned to provide animal health care throughout Sweden. The firm has a presence in four different regions in Sweden and employs 340 veterinarians who work primarily with pets, horses and farm animals.

The firm has always viewed the animal as the customer, rather than the owner of the animal, a fact that stems from the obligation of the state in Sweden to provide animal care throughout the country.

Today, several innovative competitors are establishing networks throughout Sweden to provide veterinary services in different organizational forms. In the segments of pets and horses, the veterinary firm is facing new and existing actors coming together in new constellations.

How the firm used the BM model

Based on the changing business landscape, the organization has initiated a project called "One Step Ahead". This was part of a plan to become the "most attractive veterinary actor" on the Swedish market and to create an organization that is more business-driven and customer-oriented.

Within this project, the managers in the veterinary firm needed to communicate the objective of becoming a more business-driven and customer-oriented organization, including internally to the veterinarians, as well as to the management team.

Thus, the managers in the veterinary firm used the BM model as a "communication tool", both in terms of oral presentations and as a framework in one of their written reports. Regarding the oral presentations, the manager responsible for this project explained:

When I presented what I wanted us to do for the management team, I used the BM model since it simplified what otherwise would have seemed almost impossible. Becoming a business organization is a huge step to undertake when you are a veterinarian whose focus is on the well-being of animals.

She continued:

When the management team saw my presentation of the four categories, they all thought it was doable. Hey, how hard can it be? It's just four principles that we have to manage in terms of becoming a real business organization!

Regarding the written usage, the managers in the veterinary firm produced a report titled “One Step Ahead” to describe the changes needed to accomplish the goal of being a more business-driven organization. In this report, the BM model was used to describe the necessary organizational changes.

For example, regarding the category of “business standardization”, the report contains a description of the importance of standardizing the services it is providing, as such standardization facilitates internal and external communication. The report also recommends creating a portfolio of standardized services that will be marketed and sold in each segment of the market.

In addition, recommendations are provided under the heading “Probationary business rationalization” to provide the veterinarians with standardized documents to calculate different business cases, and a section is dedicated to emphasizing the management of business relationships internal and externally (as described in the BM model as “business fraternization”). Related to this category are recommendations for more effective internal dissemination of information, and suggestions to develop new methods so that information about customers can be collected more effectively.

Other recommendations in the report concern enhancing individual competencies in sales (related to the category of “personalization” in the BM model). One example is the emphasis on the role of sales management in the organization:

We all need to be better in sales and [in] doing business [at] all levels in the organization.

The manager responsible for this change project summarized the value she believed the BM model has provided as follows:

It's like an air photograph from 10,000 meters and we have used it as a tool for making the transition to a new organization possible in practice [. . .] for communication internally to the management team but also to co-workers [. . .].

Case 3 – A global sales-consultancy firm

Background

The global sales-consultancy firm was founded in Sweden in the early 1950s, and now has a presence in 40 countries. The company offers sales and leadership education for companies, but is currently facing a highly competitive market with low margins. As the best-known brand in Sweden, and also the highest-priced supplier of these services, the company is facing several competitors, who are often small companies or one-man firms that can deliver similar services (such as basic sales training) at a much lower price.

Over the years, this organization has continually developed services and courses, and its portfolio is currently so large and disorganized that, according to one of the managers:

No one in the organization knows all our offerings [. . .] they are almost innumerable.

How the firm used the BM model

The firm has an objective of moving away from being “just another sales training company” that delivers basic sales training courses, and instead climbing the value chain and becoming perceived as a more strategic “business developer”.

In 2008, the company's retired founder read about the BM model (before it was published) and thought that it could serve as an “umbrella”, or framework, for the company's service portfolio. The organization started a development project in which the consultants in Sweden could use the BM model as a basis for the various services they could offer the customer. The consultants were trained in groups to present the BM model, and were also given information about where in the BM model different offerings in the sales consultancy firm were to be situated. For example, after merging the service portfolio and the BM model in the category of “business fraternization”, there were offerings on key account manager education; in relation to the category of “business standardization”, offerings were provided regarding the implementation of training modules in the sales process; finally, stemming from the probationary “business rationalization”, seminars were offered on how to classify customers into A, B or C groups depending on forecasts of their revenue potential.

The company's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in Sweden explained the situation as follows:

Some of our consultants can't see the whole picture [. . .] it is so fragmented [. . .] they sell some sales training here and some sales training there but we need to change that [. . .] we need to become a trusted partner to our customers [. . .].

In this process, the consultants used the BM model as a way of diagnosing the customers by measuring or assessing the competencies of the customer organization in each of the four categories; this was achieved by developing specific questions in each category that aimed to measure each particular dimension. For example, the consultants could claim that a certain organization had strengths in its handling of issues depicted by the category of “business standardization”, but certain weaknesses in terms of “business fraternization”.

At other times, this quantitative method for analyzing the customer was not suitable, and the consultants instead conducted workshops in which different members in the customer organization analyzed the strengths and weaknesses in each category based on group discussions. These workshops lasted from three hours to an entire day, and the objective was the same as in the quantitative survey, to assess strengths and weaknesses in an analysis to present the “remedies”; that is, to sell their courses and training modules.

The CEO in Sweden explained the benefits of using the BM model as follows:

It's like being an alchemist [. . .] the model gives you four primordial elements [. . .] you can say that it gives you the answer to the question what should we do? [. . .] But the customer also want to know how they should go about it [. . .] that's where we come in with our service portfolio [. . .].

He also described the difficulties of using the BM model as a framework. Most of the consultants had been trained to use this framework, but not all consultants adopted it because it was demanding for some to have a discussion with the manager in the customer organization that was embracing almost all organizational functions, and not just sales:

“Our customers are very qualified [. . .] our problem is that some of our consultants, often the younger ones, are not able to handle such qualified discussions [with the customers] about how different dimensions affect each other [. . .] they [go] on selling some courses in the same way that they always have done [. . .].

Analysis

Each of the three cases described in this study have elements of all three models of the use of scientific research.

Instrumental use

In the three cases described in this article, it is obvious that the managers faced concrete problems. In the IT firm, the managers were dealing with a “lost profile” and customers trying to keep them at arm’s length. In the veterinary firm, the managers were trying to build a business-driven organization, while the problem facing the sales consultancy was a resilient market position and a fragmented service portfolio. Managers in all of these organizations tried to use the BM model to solve these problems.

Conceptual use

All three cases described in this article have elements of conceptual use. In the IT firm, the managers used the BM model to emphasize the dimension of collaboration in complex outsourcing deals. This can be viewed as a creative application of the research, as the BM model in itself does not place particular emphasis on any one of the four principles. Similarly, in the veterinary firm, the managers used the BM model to communicate an organizational transformation process. This can be viewed as creative and flexible as well, as the BM model is a substantive theory of complex selling processes, and not primarily organizational processes. Such translation of the BM model into a unique organizational context with situation-specific challenges is also evident in the case of the sales consultancy firm, in which the managers used the BM model as an “umbrella” for their straggling and disorganized service portfolio.

Symbolic use

There are elements of symbolic use in all three cases. For example, the BM model itself does not state that the dimension of collaboration is the most important ingredient in a complex business process. In fact, this component is only one of four essential aspects in the model. Nevertheless, the IT firm used the BM model in a somewhat “partisan” way to legitimize the dimensions of collaboration.

The veterinary firm also showed elements of symbolic use. In this organization, the BM model was used as a communication tool for co-workers and top management. However, in this process, the BM model was used to legitimize and justify the transition from an organization that looks upon animals as the focus of all attention, to an organization that is more oriented toward humans as its customers; this is a topic that the BM model did not cover in its original version. The managers said that there was initially a great deal of resistance toward such a new “business perspective”, but that by using the BM model it was easier to motivate such a change than it would have been if the managers had simply stated that the new goal was for everyone to become a “salesperson”.

Symbolic use of the BM model was present in the sales consultancy firm in the sense that it used this research to strengthen the credibility of its own services. By using the BM model as an “umbrella”, or framework, not only did the firm create a frame for its portfolio of “innumerable services” but it also legitimized its own services as being almost based on

“research”. In reality, the company’s services and offerings were the same as they had always been, but they were now mapped into a research framework.

Research propositions

The findings of this study regarding managers’ use of a conceptual device or model in B2B research can be summarized according to several research propositions. First, the managers used the BM model in an action-oriented and dynamic manner, in which they translated and adopted the research to the problem at hand. This is in accordance with the description in the literature that the researcher and the managers are on an “equal footing” (Cornelissen, 2000). In this mode of use, the managers were not simply receivers of research, but co-producers, as they immodestly adopted the research to the problems at hand. They asked, “How can I use this research to solve my problems?” rather than passively receiving input from the researcher about what to do, as is the case in the more linear model of the use of scientific research. In this way, the managers can be seen as what Schön (1983) described as “reflective practitioners”, who interpreted ideas into existing cognitive schemes and visions and used them for concrete cases in practice.

Here, the following proposition can be distinguished:

- P1. Conceptual use is characterized by a translational and flexible use in which the managers creatively adapt the research to the problems at hand in an action-oriented and dynamic fashion.

Regarding instrumental use, the existing literature suggests that instrumental use of marketing and organizational research is a rare phenomenon. For example, Beyer and Trice (1982, p. 599) argued that “instrumental use is unlikely to be detected unless potential users studied are carefully chosen to match the range of actions prescribed by the research in question”. The present study shows that instrumental use is not such a rare phenomenon after all, as all three organizations used the BM model instrumentally to solve problems in a direct way – though they did so only after having translated it to match the problems they had at the time.

Regarding instrumental use, the following proposition can be distinguished:

- P2. Instrumental use is often preceded by conceptual use, in which the research is creatively translated in an action-oriented and dynamic fashion.

All three organizations used the BM model symbolically. The managers used it to legitimate their actions or their organization’s actions, both currently and in the past. It is notable that the BM model in itself does not have explicit and normative guidelines for either outsourcing deals or organizational change processes, or regarding what consultancy services match any deficiencies in any of the four categories. Therefore, the symbolic use present in these three organizations was a result of creative and flexible adaptations of the BM model to the problems the managers were experiencing at the time.

This leads to the following proposition:

P3. Symbolic use is often preceded by conceptual use, in which the research is creatively translated in an action-oriented and dynamic fashion.

Thus, this study argues that conceptual use of B2B research is a prerequisite for instrumental and symbolic use. In other words, when managers have had an opportunity to translate the research in accordance with existing visions and problems, this process clears the way for both instrumental and symbolic use. This leads to the following proposition:

P4. Conceptual use, which is characterized by translational and flexible use, is an antecedent for both instrumental use and symbolic use.

Regarding moderators of the use of marketing research, the literature suggests “operational quality”, “goal relevance”, “descriptive relevance” and “timeliness” (Cornelissen and Lock, 2002). In the three cases in this study, these moderators were not prominent because they assume a linear view of the use of scientific research in which research and organizational goals are fixed, and perceived in a similar manner by everyone involved. Instead, this study suggests that the most prominent moderator of the use of the BM model was its “abstractedness”, which lends it to a creative and flexible translation. This is in line with the argument in the literature that abstractedness can actually enhance managerial use (Astley and Zammuto, 1992, p. 444). Therefore, the following proposition regarding moderators is suggested:

P5. The abstractness of a conceptual device in B2B research is positively related to creative conceptual use in a flexible and action-oriented manner.

However, the abstractedness in itself did not create the usage; instead, when the abstractedness of the BM model met the immodest creativity of the managers, the result was innovative use of the BM model.

The findings in this study can be summarized in the following model:

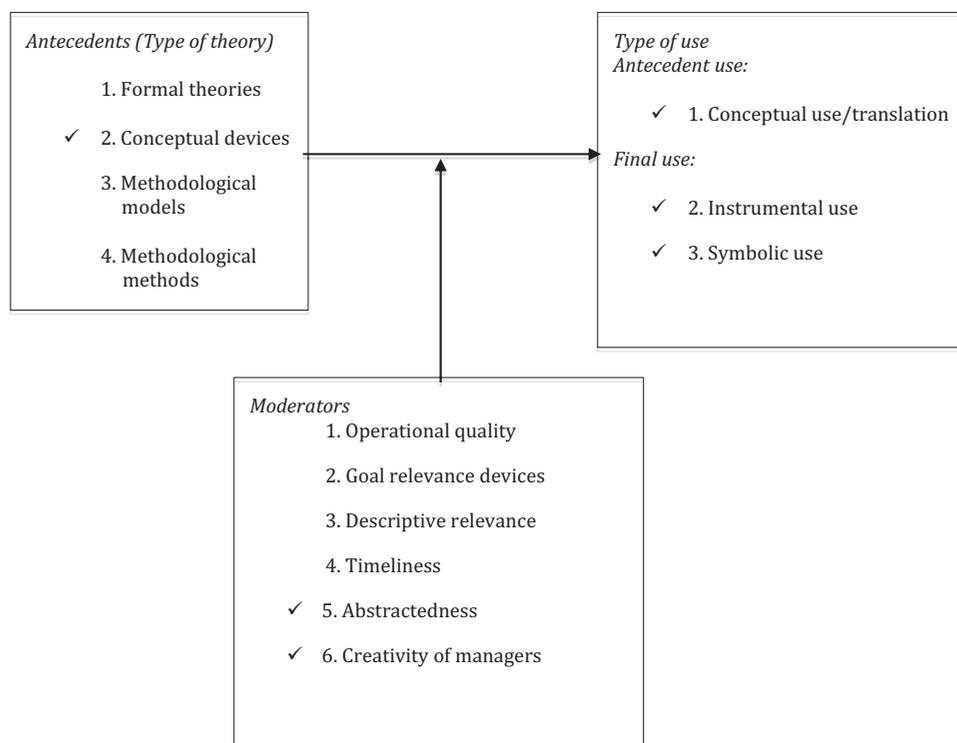
As Figure 2 shows, when managers use a conceptual model or devices in B2B research, the abstractedness and the creativity of the managers are important *moderating factors*, which facilitate creative, flexible and dynamic use. *Antecedent use* occurs when managers translate the conceptual model in such a flexible and dynamic fashion. Finally, this conceptual use clears the way for the *final use*, which is both instrumental and symbolic.

Discussion and implications

This study suggests that managers use conceptual devices in B2B research in an action-oriented, flexible and dynamic way. This conceptual or translational mode of use is characterized by managers’ adoption of the research to the problem they are facing at that particular time. These findings have implications for both managers and researchers in the B2B domain.

Based on the findings in the present study, managers can reflect upon how, as actors who are on “equal footing” with researchers, they can use B2B research in a flexible and action-oriented way. This implies that even if some research

Figure 2 An extension of Cornelissen and Lock’s (2005) model, which explains “how” and “why” managers use conceptual devices in B2B research



outputs have certain relevance in one area, managers might reflect on alternate usage. This translation process is highly creative, and can substantially broaden the areas of B2B research application, as well as increasing the manager's interest in B2B research. In so doing, managers can not only find a new spectrum of usage in their organization but also contribute to research in an interactive and creative way.

In terms of implications for researchers, this study suggests that conceptual devices in B2B research are highly usable by managers in several different ways. Contrary to what extant literature suggests, this study implies that research that is abstract in nature has inherently greater possibilities for managerial relevance compared to other research, due to its potential for flexible and dynamic interpretations. The present study also suggests that researchers are not simply the producers of research for managers to passively consume or reject. Instead, B2B research can benefit from encountering the messiness and chaos of the managers' worlds.

From this perspective, researchers can embark on a rewarding and creative journey together with those subjected to their inquiries; this process only begins when we think we are finished. After that, researchers can wait for a response that might be unexpected, but can definitely be used to trigger the imagination and provide input for otherwise unforeseeable future research trajectories.

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Further reading

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