

**Summaries of Selected Sessions from the
2008 AMA Winter Educators' Conference
(Austin, TX)**

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3.6 Sales and Relationship Marketing (Special Session)

Consequences of Customer Relationships and Partnerships for Marketing Knowledge and Decisions

Chair:

Ed Nijssen, Eindhoven University of Technology

Participants:

Learning in Manufacturer-Distributor Partnerships: Does Knowledge Pay Off?

Jacqueline van Beuningen

Christine Moorman, Duke University

Ko de Ruyter, Maastricht University

Martin Wetzels, Maastricht University

David Cox, University of Technology, Sydney

Customer Involvement in NPD and its Effect on Exploration and Exploitation Learning: The Mediating and Moderating Role of Anticipated Value of a Particular Customer Cooperation

Bas Hillebrand, Nijmegen School of Management

Jeroen de Jong, Tilberg University

Ron Kemp, University of Wageningen

Ed Nijssen, Eindhoven University of Technology

The Use of First Reference Customers in new Product/Service Commercialization

Tony DiBenedetto, Temple University

Joost Wouters, Eindhoven University of Technology

Ed Nijssen, Eindhoven University of Technology

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As relationship marketing has become more important in the success of businesses, relationships with customers have become increasingly important. This session sought to better understand the relationships that businesses have with their customers. The three papers presented all centered on this theme but explored it in different ways. The first paper examined relationships with salespeople and the role of training and knowledge in increasing firm performance. The second paper examined how businesses can utilize customer knowledge in the new product development process. Finally, the third paper sought to understand how the initial firm to carry a new product influences the success and growth of the new venture.

The first paper presented focused on transferring knowledge learned in a training situation to increased firm performance. Utilizing IBM salespersons, the role of training and learning was explored. When a salesperson goes to training, does that person perceive that they have learned anything? When training employees, it is important that they value the learning and feel like they can apply it. Whether or not the employee felt that s/he learned something and valued it depended on whether they were dependent on that supplier or not. If they were non-exclusive partners to the training firm, they gained more knowledge but felt less committed to the firm. However, dependent employees valued the learning and perceived that they had learned more. These findings suggest that less dependant partners value learning less and realistic expectations should be made about learning.

The second paper presented focused on what small firms could learn from customers in the new product development process. Because learning is a core element in product development, customers could play a role in this process. However, having ties to customers can result in a dark and bright side for the firm. Using these ties with customers could cause the firm to have a narrow focus but also result in the transfer of knowledge. Knowing this, how does a firm decide when they should use customer knowledge in new product development? To answer this question, the firm should assess the value of cooperation with the customer beforehand. Assessing the value of cooperation with the customer ensures that a good customer partner is chosen and confident and intense cooperation follows. In addition, it ensures effective learning for the business so that they have gained knowledge in the relationship with the customer. Choosing the right customer, having good cooperation and effective learning then contributes to new product development for the firm.

The third presentation focused on customer relationships in the commercialization of a high-tech product or service. As a new venture attempts to commercialize a new product, what role does the initial company selling the product to the ultimate consumer play? This paper attempted to answer the question of how reference customers influence commercialization of innovation in new ventures. When new ventures begin in product development, they are more focused on technology and obtaining capital while ignoring the role of commercialization and their potential market. This is not an adequate strategy because not only does the new venture have to sell the product, but it also has to sell itself. This influences the company's survival and growth. To sell the technology and the company, the referent customer becomes important. This referent customer serves as a way to show other people the product and act as an information source. Thus, it is important that this referent customer have high visibility and prestige in order to reduce risk and uncertainty in the ultimate consumer. When selecting the referent customer, the selection should not only be based on coincidence or technical or sales considerations but also on chances for market development.