

RESEARCH NOTE

The Impact of Suppliers' Perceptions of Reseller Market Orientation on Key Relationship Constructs

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A number of researchers have reported the positive benefits of creating and maintaining a market orientation. This study is one of the first to explicitly investigate the effects of market orientation within a channel context. It is proposed that a supplier's perceptions of a reseller's market orientation will positively affect the supplier's perceptions of certain key relationship marketing constructs. Data collected from 380 suppliers were used to test the hypotheses. All hypotheses were supported.

In recent years, market orientation has received a great deal of attention from marketing scholars (e.g., Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Narver and Slater 1990; Slater and Narver 1994). These researchers have reported that firms implementing a market orientation may gain a number of positive benefits, including increased profitability (e.g., Slater and Narver 1994; Webster 1992), improved employee attitudes (Jaworski and Kohli 1993), and more customer-oriented sales forces (Siguaw, Brown, and Widing 1994).

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Moreover, Hunt and Morgan (1995) state that firms able to effectively employ the "resource" of market orientation are likely to enjoy a "position of sustainable competitive advantage and superior long-run financial performance" (p. 13).

Although the body of research related to market orientation is flourishing, to date little of this research has investigated the construct as it relates to relationship marketing. Given the highly interdependent nature of relationships between organizations involved in a channel of distribution and their necessitated reliance on each other, an examination of the linkage between the market orientation and relationship marketing literatures is warranted.

Relationship marketing, as a field of study, began to attract attention in the early 1990s as firms began to enter into long-term associations to counter the effects of increased customer demands and intensifying global competition (Cravens 1995). The importance of creating these long-term relationships has been made explicit by Kalwani and Narayandas (1995:14), who state that "supplier firms in long-term relationships with select customers are able to retain or even improve their profitability levels more than firms which employ a transactional approach." Furthermore, Lusch and Brown (1996) have found that it is not the length of the relationship that leads to positive

outcomes but rather the relationship orientation. They conclude that "attitude and perspective toward the long term is much more important than merely long-standing relationships" (p. 33). While a number of constructs have emerged as potential indicators of an attitude and perspective toward the creation and maintenance of a long-term relationship, the greatest support has been provided for trust, cooperation, commitment, and satisfaction (e.g., Anderson and Narus 1990; Anderson and Weitz 1989, 1992; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Although previous studies have only considered the downstream effects of market orientation, we posit that market orientation may also have upstream effects. That is, the market orientation of a reseller may enhance the supplier's perceptions of its relationship with the reseller. Thus, we propose that a supplier's perception of a reseller's market-oriented actions may positively affect the indicators (i.e., trust, cooperation, commitment, and satisfaction) of a long-term channel relationship that, in turn, should help to sustain the partnership in a highly competitive channel environment. For example, a supplier that perceives a reseller as being market oriented may attribute greater expertise and benevolence to the reseller and have stronger perceptions of relationship cooperative norms and satisfaction. These positive assessments of relationship factors should prompt the supplier to consider the market-oriented reseller as a valuable partner and, therefore, strive to preserve the partnership.

The purpose of this article, then, is to determine the effect of a supplier's perceptions of a reseller's market orientation on the supplier's perception of key relationship factors—trust, commitment, cooperative norms, and satisfaction. Positive effects would indicate that a supplier that perceives its reseller as being market oriented would be more likely to remain in a long-term relationship with that reseller. In the following sections, we develop and present testable hypotheses of these relationships, discuss the research methods, present results, and discuss the findings.

HYPOTHESES

For the purposes of this research, we adopt Deshpandé and Farley's (1996:13) definition of market orientation: "The set of cross-functional processes and activities directed at creating and satisfying customers through continuous needs-assessment." We use this conceptualization of market orientation to develop theoretical support for our hypothesized relationships concerning the effects of suppliers' perceptions of their resellers' market orientations (PMO) on suppliers' perceptions of relationship variables.

PMO-Trust

Trust is reliance on and confidence in partners (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992) and comprises

credibility and benevolence (Ganesan 1994). Credibility refers to one party's belief that the other party has the required expertise to perform a task, and benevolence pertains to the belief that one party will act in a manner beneficial to the other party. Resellers, perceived as behaving in a market-oriented manner, are more likely to be deemed credible and benevolent, and thus trustworthy, by the supplier. The market-oriented reseller, by definition, will be acquiring and using customer information (enhancing credibility) to improve its customer service (enhancing benevolence) continuously. Here the reseller is demonstrating to the supplier that (1) the reseller is the best party to perform the assigned task (that of interacting with end users), and (2) the reseller is behaving in the best interest of the supplier because the market orientation of the reseller creates and satisfies customers, thereby increasing sales and improving profitability (see Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann 1994) for both the reseller and supplier.

Therefore, we present the following:

Hypothesis 1: The level of supplier-perceived reseller market orientation is positively associated with supplier trust in the reseller.

PMO-Commitment

Commitment comprises three facets: "a desire to develop a stable relationship, a willingness to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship, and a confidence in the stability of the relationship" (Anderson and Weitz 1992:19). Although very little research has been conducted relative to the effect of market orientation on commitment, two studies have examined relationships between market orientation and variables similar to commitment. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) conceptualized a causal relationship between market orientation and "repeat business from customers," while Narver and Slater (1990) empirically tested and found support for an association between market orientation and customer retention. Intuitively, then, a supplier is likely to be more committed to a reseller that uses market-oriented behaviors to retain the supplier's end users as customers. As Kumar, Stern, and Achrol (1992:240) noted, "A supplier can increase its own legitimacy by being associated with reputable resellers who do an excellent job of satisfying the supplier's customers . . . and will evaluate more favorably those resellers that help facilitate adaptation to the environment." Market-oriented resellers not only seek to satisfy customer needs but, by definition, acquire and respond to information from customers, competitors, and other facets of the environment. This information is likely to be relayed to suppliers to gain their support in responding to current and future needs of customers. Logically, then, the supplier should report greater commitment to the channel relationship when the reseller is market oriented.

Hypothesis 2: The level of supplier-perceived reseller market orientation is positively associated with supplier commitment to the reseller.

PMO-Cooperative Norms

Cooperative norms are defined as the belief that both the supplier and reseller are working jointly to achieve mutual and individual goals (Cannon and Perreault 1997; Stern and Reve 1980) while avoiding opportunistic actions. The link between market orientation and cooperative norms has not been specifically addressed in the literature, although Kohli and Jaworski (1990) noted that a firm's market orientation increases teamwork among employees. Teamwork would imply cooperation and a cooperative work environment.

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) also suggest that the activities and behaviors associated with a market orientation necessitate the commitment of resources. A supplier that perceives its trading partner as willing to take on the added costs of behaving in a market-oriented fashion is likely to reward the market-oriented reseller by being more cooperative, especially when the reseller's actions improve customer relationships with the supplier's end users. Furthermore, the activities associated with a reseller's market orientation requires collecting and responding to information regarding customer needs. As previously noted, to adequately respond to these revealed customer needs, resellers will likely share information and engage in cooperative efforts with suppliers to meet end user needs. This information exchange will also assist the supplier and its reseller in foreseeing and responding to each other's objectives (Lusch and Brown 1996). These arguments suggest that higher levels of market orientation on the part of the reseller will improve the supplier's perception of cooperative norms established in the channel relationship.

Hypothesis 3: The level of supplier-perceived reseller market orientation is positively associated with supplier perceptions of cooperative norms with the reseller.

PMO-Satisfaction

Ruekert and Churchill (1984:227) have called satisfaction a fundamental aspect of channel relationships and define it as "the domain of all characteristics of the relationship between a channel member and another institution in the channel which the focal organization finds rewarding, profitable, instrumental, and satisfying." We propose that a supplier would express a greater degree of satisfaction with its relationship with a market-oriented reseller because the latter would be making efforts to monitor and respond to the supplier's need to satisfy end users.

This conjecture is predicated on Kumar et al.'s (1992) argument that the reseller's efforts to achieve end user satisfaction assists the supplier in the attainment of its goals and thus produces greater supplier satisfaction with the reseller. Accordingly,

Hypothesis 4: The level of supplier-perceived reseller market orientation is positively associated with supplier satisfaction with the reseller.

METHODS

Data Collection

The names of suppliers were obtained by contacting reseller members of the National Association of Wholesalers (NAW) by telephone and asking them to provide the name of a contact person at a primary supplying organization. A primary supplying organization was requested because we wanted the informant to have reliable knowledge of the reselling firm's operations, especially regarding the reseller's market orientation. Most reseller informants providing the desired information were in upper management (e.g., presidents/CEOs, 35.9%; vice presidents, 22.6%; purchasing managers, 13.0%; general managers, 9.3%; sales managers, 8.9%) and came from a broad range of industries, including electronics, fasteners, industrial equipment, furniture manufacturing (including some forestry), hydraulics (including fluid power), welding (including equipment, chemicals, and industrial gases), and power transmissions (including internal combustion engines and bearings). These resellers provided the names of 1,127 suppliers, who were then sent self-report surveys designed to assess their relationship with the corresponding reseller. Some 380 suppliers responded, resulting in a 33.7 percent response rate. More than 25 percent of the supplier respondents were sales managers, 14.9 percent were district managers, 14.5 percent were vice presidents, 9.2 percent were regional managers, 8.3 percent were sales representatives, 6.1 percent were marketing managers, and 5.7 percent were general managers, while the remaining respondents held positions ranging from president to service manager. The suppliers reported that the tenure of the business relationships between their firms and the designated resellers ranged from 1 to 73 years with a mean of 18.3 years, a mode of 10 years, and a median of 15 years.

Measures

All construct measures used in this study were 7-point, multi-item scales anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*, with the exception of the cooperative norms measure, which was anchored by *very inaccurate*

TABLE 1
Correlation Matrix of the Constructs

	<i>Perceived Market Orientation</i>	<i>Trust</i>	<i>Cooperation</i>	<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Commitment</i>
Perceived market orientation	1.000				
Trust	.636*	1.000			
Cooperation	.500*	.613*	1.000		
Satisfaction	.463*	.698*	.520*	1.000	
Commitment	.352*	.398*	.428*	.441*	1.000

* $p < .001$.

description and very accurate description. Although the measures used in this study were all taken from previously published research and required only minor changes in wording (e.g., substituting the word *distributor* for *retailer*), scale validity for each measure was assessed by examining item intercorrelations and item total correlations followed by factor analysis. The scale items of each measure exhibited high and significant item intercorrelations and factored into a single item, thus demonstrating unidimensionality for each measure. Discriminant validity between the constructs was assessed using LISREL (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993) by sequentially fixing the correlations between each pair of constructs to 1 and comparing the chi-square goodness-of-fit index for this model to the chi-square value for the base model (with all correlations free). In every comparison, the chi-square value for the base model was significantly lower, implying that discriminant validity existed between each pair of constructs. The items used to make up each construct along with the scale means, standard deviations, and coefficient alphas are presented in the appendix. Items in each scale were averaged to obtain the scale score for use in the subsequent test of the hypotheses. The correlations among the constructs are shown in Table 1.

Perceived market orientation. Our primary concern in measuring PMO was the ability to identify a scale that would allow the assessment of one firm's perceptions of the other firm's market orientation. The construct we label PMO was measured by a nine-item scale developed by Deshpandé, Farley, and Webster (1993) to measure what they originally called customer orientation but later relabeled market orientation (Deshpandé and Farley 1996). Because the generally accepted definition of customer orientation (see Saxe and Weitz 1982) is different from the manner in which Deshpandé et al. used it, we used the relabeled name for this construct because it is more in keeping with what the instrument actually measures (i.e., customer and competitor orientation). Furthermore, we maintained Deshpandé et al.'s basic operationalization of this construct.¹ A factor analysis of this construct indicated that one item loaded on a second factor. This item was dropped from further analysis, which resulted in a single-factor so-

lution with loadings between .46 and .89 and explained 45 percent of the variance.

Trust. Ganesan (1994) argues that within a relationship marketing context, trust appears to consist of at least two important dimensions: credibility and benevolence. Trust was measured using 12 items originally presented by Ganesan that were specifically designed to tap into the two dimensions mentioned above. Seven items assessed credibility, and 5 items indicated benevolence. Submitting the 12 items to a factor analysis resulted in a single-factor solution that accounted for 55.7 percent of the variance.

Commitment. The five items used to measure commitment were developed by Anderson and Weitz (1992) and were designed to determine the behavioral commitment one firm has toward another. The factor analysis resulted in a single factor that accounted for 46.06 percent of the variance.

Cooperative norms. A six-item scale developed by Cannon (1992) was used to measure cooperative norms of the relationship. The scale required respondents to indicate the extent to which the items described their experience with the trading partner. A factor analysis resulted in a single factor that accounted for 50.48 percent of the variance.

Satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using a three-item scale taken from Kumar et al. (1992) and was concerned with the extent to which the firm agreed or disagreed with statements of satisfaction with the channel partner relationship. A single-factor solution was derived that accounted for 80.29 percent of the variance.

RESULTS

The hypotheses were tested using correlation analysis. Table 1 presents the correlations between the constructs and represents the tests of the hypotheses. As depicted in Table 1, all of the correlations are significant at the $p < .001$ level, which provides support for each of the stated hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the effects of a supplier's perceptions of its reseller's market orientation on the supplier's trust of the reseller, as well as on the supplier's perceptions of cooperative norms in, commitment to, and satisfaction with the relationship. Results from this study provide support for a strong linkage between PMO and important relationship marketing constructs. That is, the findings indicate that a supplier that perceives a reseller as being market oriented is likely to have more positive perceptions of the relationship with that reseller. These positive perceptions result in a willingness for the supplier to remain in the relationship with the reseller. This, in turn, should provide the benefits that accrue to channel partners engaged in long-term relationships (see Kalwani and Narayandas 1995).

Specifically, our findings indicate that there is a significant association between a supplier's perception of a reseller as highly market oriented and the supplier's perception that the same reseller is highly credible and benevolent (i.e., trustworthy). This finding implies that a reseller's perceived efforts at satisfying end users result in the supplier's belief that the reseller partner is more expert in the performance of its duties and is concerned with behaving in the best interests of the supplier. The supplier's perception of the reseller's market orientation is also associated with the supplier's belief that cooperative norms exist in the relationship; thus, the supplier of a market-oriented reseller is more likely to believe that both channel partners are working to satisfy mutual goals. Suppliers associated with market-oriented resellers are also more committed to and satisfied with the reseller relationship. Both of these results indicate that the supplier is likely to place a high value on the relationship with a market-oriented reseller and will work to preserve that relationship.

Perceptions of a channel partner's market orientation may be important to a supplier for three additional reasons. First, suppliers partnering with highly market-oriented resellers may be able to create greater value for end users and thereby gain a comparative advantage by creating a team of market-oriented providers. Second, suppliers may be able to improve their own levels of performance through a trickle-up effect; when resellers' sales improve, by virtue of the dependent supplier-reseller relationship, suppliers' sales improve. Finally, the relationship between a supplier and its resellers may be improved when the supplier perceives its resellers to be highly market oriented. This outcome may be an especially relevant concern given the importance of relational market-based assets (Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey 1998) and Day's (1992) assertion that there appears to be a fit between the strategic imperatives of the 1990s and current marketer competencies, especially in the area of managing relationships between

organizations. These likely benefits suggest that suppliers may want to use perceived market orientation as an appropriate measure for evaluating their channel partners because of the potential benefits of market orientation. Moreover, the positive results suggest that suppliers should do all they can to aid in the development and improvement of the market orientation of the reseller partners to improve their own satisfaction levels.

While this study was taken from the perspective of the supplier with the goal of determining the value of assessing the market orientation of resellers, the findings also have implications for the reseller. By embracing a market orientation, resellers can improve their channel relationships with their suppliers and place themselves in a position to be of greater value to the supplier. By doing so, the reseller may also be able to wield more power in the channel and obtain special concessions from the supplier because, as evidenced by the current findings, the supplier will be more satisfied with the reseller relationship.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, researchers may want to test the generalizability of our findings in other business environments and contexts. Although our respondents represented a wide range of industries, almost none represented consumer goods industries. In addition, the sample consisted of only U.S.-based firms. Consequently, testing the hypothesized relationship using respondents from consumer goods companies and/or companies based in other geographical regions would be beneficial in determining the stability of the relationships.

A future study might also examine additional upstream effects of the reseller's market orientation. Although our results suggest that a reseller's market orientation will improve relationship factors for the supplier, effects of this construct on other variables, such as supplier dependency and supplier channel power, have not been empirically tested. Researchers may find this stream of research has much to contribute to the discipline.

Although suppliers presumably would want to retain market-oriented resellers within their channels, there may be trade-offs associated with such an alliance. Thus, another stream of research might examine the costs associated with preserving the relationship with a market-oriented reseller (i.e., loss of channel power, special concessions) with the benefits that accrue as a result of being affiliated with a reseller that works to satisfy end user needs.

This research is subject to the usual limitations of survey research. In addition, in the interests of obtaining a higher response rate and remaining within budgetary constraints, the use of single informants was necessary in this study. The use of multiple informants would have been

preferable because multiple informants eliminate errors resulting from the one informant's selective perception, thus increasing reliability (Phillips 1981).

Finally, it should be noted that the results reported in this study could be attributable, in part, to common method variance between PMO and the other four relationship marketing constructs. Consequently, the hypotheses put forth in this study should be retested by collecting data from matched supplier-reseller dyads; the resellers could provide a market orientation measure, and the suppliers could provide measures of the relationship marketing constructs. This methodology would provide a more robust test of the hypotheses since the measures would be independent of one another.

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APPENDIX Measures of the Constructs

Perceived Market Orientation

1. Our distributor has routine or regular measures of customer service.*
2. Our distributor's products and service development are based on good market and customer information.
3. Our distributor knows its competitors well.
4. Our distributor has a good sense of the value we place on products and services.
5. Our distributor is more customer focused than their competitors.
6. Our distributor competes primarily based on product or service differentiation.
7. Our distributor believes the customer's interest should always come first, ahead of the distributor's interest.
8. Our distributor's products/services are the best in the business.
9. Our distributor believes its business exists primarily to serve customers.

($M = 5.36$, $SD = .86$, Cronbach's alpha = .83)

Trust

1. This distributor has been frank in dealing with me.
2. Promises made by this distributor are reliable.
3. This distributor is knowledgeable about the product.
4. This distributor has problems understanding our position. (Reverse scored)

5. This distributor has made sacrifices for us in the past.
6. This distributor cares for my welfare.
7. In times of shortages, this distributor has gone out on a limb for me.
8. This distributor is like a friend.
9. We feel this distributor has been on our side.
10. This distributor does not make false claims.
11. This distributor is not open in dealing with us. (Reverse scored)
12. This distributor has problems answering our questions. (Reverse scored)

($M = 5.65$, $SD = .99$, Cronbach's alpha = .92)

Cooperative Norms

1. No matter who is at fault, problems are joint responsibilities.
2. Both sides are concerned about the other's profitability.
3. One party will not take advantage of a strong bargaining position.
4. Both sides are willing to make cooperative changes.
5. We must work together to be successful.
6. We do not mind owing each other favors.

($M = 5.55$, $SD = .90$, Cronbach's alpha = .79)

Satisfaction

1. The relationship of my company with this distributor has been an unhappy one. (Reverse scored)
2. Generally, my company is very satisfied with its overall relationship with this distributor.
3. My company is very pleased with its working relationship with this distributor.

($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.15$, Cronbach's alpha = .88)

Commitment

1. We defend this distributor when outsiders criticize that company.
2. We are continually on the lookout for another distributor to replace or to add in this distributor's territory. (Reverse scored)
3. If another distributor offered us better coverage, we would most certainly take them on, even if it meant dropping this distributor. (Reverse scored)
4. We are patient with this distributor when they make mistakes that cause us trouble.
5. We are willing to dedicate whatever people and resources it takes to grow sales for this distributor.

($M = 5.80$, $SD = .83$, Cronbach's alpha = .65)

* indicates items dropped from further analysis.

NOTE

1. As support for our operationalization, we remind readers that Deshpandé, Farley, and Webster (1993) state that they consider their conceptualization of the customer orientation construct to be synonymous with Kohli and Jaworski's (1990) conceptualization of market orientation. In addition, Deshpandé and Farley (1996) recently performed a meta-analysis designed to explore the similarities between operationalizations of market orientation created by Narver and Slater (1990); Kohli, Jaworski, and Kumar (1993); and Deshpandé et al. (1993). Using the full scales originally developed by the aforementioned authors, Deshpandé and Farley conducted a factor analysis that resulted in 10 items loading on the first factor (5 items from the Narver and Slater scale, 3 items from the Deshpandé et al. scale, and 2 items from the Kohli et al. scale). Based on the conceptual arguments presented by Deshpandé et al. as well as the empirical work conducted by Deshpandé and Farley, we feel that the use of the Deshpandé et al. scale as a measure of perceived market orientation is justified.

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