Innovation in Business-to-Business Marketing: An Introduction to the Special Issue

By

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1. Introduction and Overview of the Special Issue

Unprecedented advances in information and communication technologies have transformed how B-to-B firms approach their markets and conduct business (Gupta and Woodside 2006). As a result, new business models are adopted by B-to-B firms from a wide variety of industries e.g. banking, insurance, consultancies, transport, advertising and marketing agencies and e-retailing industry. For example, Amazon, initially a B-to-C firm, has become a platform for the sale of goods from other suppliers, as well as a cloud-services platform used by many banks. Such innovation in B-to-B marketing translates a shift in a firm's vision, mission, strategies, technological prowess and market performance (Simmons, Palmer, and Truong 2013).

To-date, B-to-B research has examined the success factors for B-to-B firms, but with little attention being paid to innovation in B-to-B marketing (Aarikka-Stenroos et al. 2017). This has resulted in limited knowledge of the new business models adopted by B-to-B firms as well as their B-to-B marketing strategy, and this could affect the theory and practice of B-to-B marketing (Rodriguez 2016). The need to address innovation in B2B marketing provides the topical basis for this special issue of the journal of Business to Business Marketing.

Against this background, the development of this special issue has been inspired by both the aforementioned advances and the 4th Academy of Marketing B-to-B Marketing Colloquium organized in Bournemouth, UK, 6th Oct 2017. This special issue "Innovation in Business to Business Marketing" was developed by and Nektarios Tzempelikos (Anglia Ruskin University, Lord Ashcroft International Business School) and Kaouther Kooli (Bournemouth University, Business School) and brings together seven superb articles discussing the latest thinking about innovation in business to business marketing. Specifically, the special issue's main objective is to continue the dialogue on how innovation can be embedded in B-to-B marketing practices and how to make research focusing on this topic more relevant and rigorous. We next elaborate on the specifics of the special issue and present the articles that are included in it.

At this point, we would like to thank David Lichtenthal, Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing Editor-in-Chief, for welcomed our idea and for kindly allowing us to develop and co-edit this special issue.

We begin with Suraksha Gupta, Michael Czinkota, and Sena Ozdemir's article *"Innovation in Sustainability Initiatives through Reverse Channels"*. The authors focus on an important notion, reverse channels, which represent an innovation in sustainability initiatives that uses the channel-based business function as a closed loop supply chain. The authors examine the role played by a brand in creating value for business customers through the adoption of reverse channels by presenting a research agenda in the form of a conceptual framework. The research agenda discussed in this paper is based on the argument that a brand provides an assurance of the quality and functional capability of the products to new users of old products, delivers rational benefits to business customers, and strengthens the customer base of manufacturers. The findings suggest that a brand can enhance customer equity, growth of the business customer and profits of the business customer by increasing in its efforts to influence the adoption of reverse-channels.

This is followed by *"What drives B-to-B marketers in emerging countries to use social media sites?"* by Kaouther Kooli, Nektarios Tzempelikos, Pantea Foroudi, and Seif Mazahreh. Building on the argument that B-to-B marketers in emerging countries still lag behind compared to peers in developed countries in terms of the use of social media sites, the study explores the factors influencing the use of social media sites by B-to-B firms in emerging countries. The authors test their hypotheses on 158 firms in Jordan by means of structural equation modelling. Perceived usefulness, perceived utility, and result demonstrability were found to significantly influence the intention to use social media. However, perceived usability of social media sites did not have any influence on B-to-B marketers' intention to use those sites.

Tim Hughes and Mario Vafeas contribute the third article entitled *"Marketing agency/client service-for-service provision in an age of digital transformation"*. Their work represents an interesting effort to use insights from the Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) theory to explore changes in agency/client value co-creation, at a time when digital transformation is having a major impact on the marketing communications process. Building on empirical data from clients and their agencies, the authors found that while much digital marketing appears to have initially been provided externally there seems to be a trend to bring these aspects of service in-house. The views of clients and agencies on their relationship, as being either transactional or a partnership, appears to be related to the degree of service required and provided.

The next article is by Len Tiu Wright, Robin Robin, Merlin Stone, and Eleni Aravopoulou. In "*Adoption of Big Data Technology for Innovation in B2B Marketing*" they develop a conceptual framework, supported by four case studies, to explore the use of big data in innovation and market leadership in B-to-B relationships. The study shows that organizations are recipients of and are collectors of big data, partly created by the increasing volume of business and customer transactions online. In addition, big data and its analytics and applications can be taken as indicators of organizations' ability to innovate to respond to market opportunities. The study highlights the role of big data in business innovation, specifically in B-to-B organizations and where their innovation can transform customer experience at the end of the value chain i.e. with final consumers.

The fifth article is *"Mobile tech: Superfood or super fad of creative business?"* by Elvira Bolat. Bolat investigates the mobile technology deployment and its role in innovation practices of creative B-to-B firms. Based on empirical data from business decision-makers from the 31 UK creative B-to-B agencies, the study shows that mobile technology is in fact a superfood that with the right combination of resources and capabilities delivers strategic benefits for creative B-to-B businesses. It is the interaction between mobile technology resources and mobile technology capabilities stimulate and facilitate process and product innovation practices. The study signals that business decision-makers can deploy mobile technology to effectively manage operations or/and produce new solutions.

The sixth article is *"Co-creating with intermediaries: Understanding their power and interest"* by Nathalia Tjandra, John Ensor, and John Thomson. Employing a case study approach, the study aims to explore the role of independent financial advisers (IFAs) in co-creation activities and identifies how their power and interest can be used to determine their level of involvement in co-creating innovation of new products and services in the financial services sector. The findings of this study indicate that independent intermediaries, such as IFAs, have a significant influence on the end customers' view on financial services brands and they partially construct the provider's brand value which is perceived and received by the end customers.

The final article in this special issue is entitled *"Evaluating constitutive dimensions of CSR e-communication: A comparison between 'Business-to-Business' and 'Close-to-Market' companies"* and is contributed by Maria Palazzo, Agostino Vollero, Pantea Foroudi, and Alfonso Siano. The authors explore the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication in B-to-B firms. Through a content analysis research design, the study explores how companies communicate on corporate websites their CSR efforts, applying a four-dimensional model. The study indicates that Business-to-Business (B-to-B) companies are more prone than Close-to-Market (C2M) organizations to be engaged in the disclosure both of CSR orientation (i.e. how their value statements reflect their commitment to sustainability) and structure (i.e. how they communicate their governance structure and certifications of CSR and how they engage with stakeholders). The study points out the constitutive dimensions and the diverse motivations that can push companies to adopt specific approaches in CSR disclosure.

2. Concluding remarks

What we found mostly in common in this set of articles is that the innovative process has changed from individual (person or organization) innovator to innovation involving multiple (people or firms) innovators cooperatively. A key message that emerges is that firms should leverage their own capabilities (e.g. managerial learning, knowledge acquisition capability) to play up their strengths to overcome many institutional constraints to enhance innovation and successfully introduce product/ service changes to the marketplace. Looking forward, we would like to see more research in this area, focusing specifically on the role of organizational support (or barriers) and firm capabilities and how their interplay can help firms competing in the marketplace by creating innovative products/ services and processes.

In conclusion, we believe that the articles of this special issue contribute to a better understanding of B-to-B problems, and the marketing concerns of practitioners and industry as per Rodriguez (2016) call, and shed light to innovation in B-to-B research by providing a broad look at issues that deserve more attention from practitioners and academic researchers. In addition, this special issue provides some directions for future research to explore more deeply and thus advance our field. We hope the readers will enjoy the reading!

3. References

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