

Value Creation Within The Sales-Marketing Interface: The Varied Approaches to Integration

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While integration within the sales-marketing interface is critical in order to create value for their customer base, the sales-marketing interface varies across firms. Hence, integration may, in fact, take different forms. This is due, in part, to the varied role of marketing across firms. Using a grounded theory approach and depth interview data collected from forty three sales and marketing executives, this study unravels the varied meaning of integration. Specifically, we find the diverse roles the marketing function plays within the firm; and that the conceptualization of sales-marketing integration construct is sensitive to the context within which it is examined. Additionally, we highlight that sales-marketing integration may not always be as important for value creation, in certain contexts. Hence, we provide a new lens to sales-marketing integration and its importance in the value-creation process. Managerial implications of study findings are also suggested.

Keywords: Sales-marketing interface, integration, value creation, grounded theory approach

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the sales-marketing interface in creating value within business relationships is widely accepted (Webster and Montgomery 1997; Kotler, Rackham, and Krishnaswamy 2006). When sales and marketing functions are integrated, firms can deliver more seamless customer value and achieve superior market performance (Guenzi and Troilo 2006). The premise underlying integration is that the collaborative and cooperative work of sales and marketing across their functional boundaries allows firms to successfully

confront the changing market conditions and competitive realities (LeMeunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2006; Piercy 2006).

Sales-marketing integration is defined as the extent to which activities carried out by sales and marketing functions are supportive of one another (Rouziès et al. 2005). The extant literature on the sales-marketing interface suggests a range of variables such as lack of alignment over objectives (Strahle et al. 1996), turf battles (Hutt 1995), lack of clear role definition (Kotler et al. 2006), cultural mismatch (Beverland et al. 2006) or thought world differences (Homburg and Jensen 2007), which may impact the degree to which the two functions remain supportive of one another.

It is worth noting that in spite of the acknowledged importance of sales-marketing integration and the inherent threats to this phenomenon within this interface, empirical research on this variable is still needed (e.g. Guenzi and Troilo 2006). For instance, a closer examination of marketing practice suggests the role of marketing varies depending on the organization and/or industry. Marketing as a function may be responsible for a specific or a wide range of strategic and tactical activities within the firm. For example, at any given point, the marketing function within a firm may have one primary responsibility such as new product development, product life cycle management, or developing marketing communication, to name a

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few. In some other firms, many of the abovementioned activities may come under the marketing umbrella with different marketing teams being responsible individual tasks (CMO Summit, 2003). When the extant theoretical conceptualizations of sales-marketing integration are juxtaposed with business realities of today, we realize that the academic literature falls short of acknowledging how the various roles marketing may play within a firm may impact interface integration.

Given that sales and marketing are *the* most crucial revenue-generating functions within business organizations, it is important, both from theoretical and managerial standpoints, to explore this boundary condition—marketing's role within the firm—and to assess its impact on sales-marketing integration. Specifically, two research questions guide this investigation:

- (a) How does the boundary condition of marketing's role impact integration within the sales-marketing interface?
- (b) How does the boundary condition of marketing's role impact the relationship between interface integration and value creation efforts of salespeople?

Given the complexity of the phenomenon and the lack of prior empirical work specifically looking at how marketing's role may affect interface integration, it is imperative to achieve a deeper understanding of the issues involved, prior to conducting deductive empirical research. Accordingly, we follow a Grounded Theory Approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998), and use data collected through forty three depth interviews of sales and marketing executives to uncover the nuances related to how marketing's role within the organization may affect interface integration and, subsequently, value creation activities of salespeople.

Within the paper, we begin by reviewing the literature on interfunctional integration in general and sales-marketing integration in particular. We then discuss our study methodology. Next, we present findings. Finally, we end the paper by offering contributions to academic and managerial practice, study limitations and potential next steps.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In one of the earlier works on the sales-marketing interface, Cespedes (1996) argued that concurrent marketing, in which sales and marketing activities are well-coordinated and carried out using cross-functional teams, can help firms achieve seamless integration between these two important functions. Kahn and Mentzer (1998), while studying marketing's integration with other departments, identified integration to be a function of both communication and collaboration. This variable has continued to attract scholars' attentions as the literature on sales-marketing interface has begun to expand. Specifically, Rouziès et al. (2005) defined sales-marketing integration as the extent to which activities carried out by the two functions are supportive of one another. Guenzi and Troilo (2006) further extended our understanding by empirically showing that, in addition to communication and collaboration between sales and marketing, variables such as trust, motivation, commitment, mutual help, reduced inter-group conflict and positive organizational climate play an important role in forging integration between sales and marketing.

While studying marketing's integration with other departments, Maltz (1997) focused on integrating mechanisms such as cross-functional teams, multifunctional training, and social orientation, as well as spatial proximity and suggested that these factors can play a crucial role in forging integration. Leenders and Wierenga (2002) argued that in order to build integration between marketing and R&D, firms must focus on mechanisms such as personnel movement, establishing informal social systems, incentives and rewards, as well as formal integrative management processes. In a sales-marketing context in particular, Rouziès et al. (2005) set the stage for empirical exploration of this area. Specifically, they highlighted the impediments to sales-marketing integration and proposed a conceptual framework including structure, processes, culture and people as four important integrating mechanisms. They also urged scholars to empirically investigate this phenomenon further. Guenzi and Troilo (2006) took the first step in this direction by showing that integration is a multifaceted phenomenon, and that different antecedents have differential effects on specific integrating mechanisms.

In a conceptual thought piece, Piercy (2006) highlighted how well-performing companies “get their act together around things that matter most to their customers” and make a totally integrated offer of superior value in customer terms. He further suggested that sales and marketing must be willing to work across their traditional boundaries to achieve integration. Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy (2006) concurred and argued that marketing’s integration of sales force in strategic activities is crucial since it allows firms to tap into the market knowledge that the sales force possesses.

In summary, scholarly research has acknowledged the importance of integration between sales and marketing functions. The empirical work that investigates sales-marketing integration, and marketing’s integration with other functions, has indicated that certain structural and relational variables play roles in facilitating integration. The literature has also suggested that companies develop certain mechanisms to foster integration. One of the limitations within this stream of literature, however, is that there has been little acknowledgement that the marketing function may perform different roles within business organizations. While it is plausible that the nature of sales-marketing integration and its subsequent effects on salespeople’s value creation activities may be sensitive to the role of marketing within the firm; lacking any prior research that has specifically investigated this phenomenon, our understanding of the nuances of integration mechanisms across a wide variety of organizational settings and its subsequent effects is limited. The aim of our study is to fill this gap in the existing literature.

METHODOLOGY

We utilized a Grounded Theory Approach for this examination. This inductive approach aims to identify nuances and develop a theory for a phenomenon that is “grounded” in data from participants who have first-hand experience of that phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin 1990; 1998). Since the extant research on interface integration has not taken a nuanced perspective regarding marketing’s varying roles and their impact on interface integration, the use of a qualitative approach helps us study the interaction between these two functions *in-vivo* (Gummesson,

2003) and allows for the emergence of new ideas regarding integration mechanisms that are grounded in participants’ experiences. By using this approach, we are able to compare and integrate our findings with the existing understanding in the literature. In effect, this approach allows us to further develop and contribute to the existing base of theory (Deshpande 1983).

Sample and Data Collection

Consistent with a grounded theory approach, we recruited study informants using the theoretical sampling technique. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to select informants based on their potential contribution to theory development. Further, Cresswell (2007) indicates that employing a diverse set of theoretically-relevant informants allows the researcher to see the conditions under which the emergent categories within a phenomenon hold true (Cresswell 2007, pgs. 240-241). Overall, our theoretical sampling philosophy led us to recruit informants from (a) both the sales and marketing organizations across different hierarchical levels, and (b) companies and industries that would allow us to capture the various roles marketing functions play within a firm. The profile of our informants can be gleaned from Table 1.

We requested participation from fifty-three potential sales and marketing professionals based in the United States. The participation request came with guaranteed informant anonymity as reflected in our findings section where informants are identified by their function, rank in their firms, gender, and industry and not by individual and/or company names. Further, as an incentive to participate in this study, we offered to share the overall findings of the study with our informants’ firms.

Our informant recruitment efforts resulted in the final sample size of forty three with ten of the potential informants declining our invitation for confidentiality reasons. The final sample came from thirty seven companies across seven different industries. Although we had more than one informant from a few companies, there were no sales-marketing dyads in our sample. Additionally, we confirmed that our key informants had been employed in their current position for a minimum of three years. The informant companies represented both large and small firms within their industries.

Table 1: Informant Profile

1	Function	Org. level	Gender (M/F)	Industries* (# of firms)	Representative job titles
	Marketing	Junior	2/4	FS (2), IT (1), Eng (1), Tel (1)	Marketing support, Marketing specialist, Marketing executive
		Middle	4/5	FS (1), HC (3), Ind (2), Phar (2)	Product manager, Manager- field marketing, Product support manager
		Senior	4/2	FS (1), IT (2), Phar (1), Tel (1)	CMO, Marketing manager
	Sales	Junior	4/4	Eng (3), HC (2), Ind (1), Phar (1)	Sales representative, Sales support 1
		Middle	3/4	HC (1), IT (1), Tel (2), Phar (2)	District sales manager, Field sales manager
		Senior	3/4	Eng (2), Ind (2), HC (1), Tel (1)	VP- sales, Director of sales
2	Industries*		Total # of firms	Annual sales (\$MM)	# of employees (range)
	FS: Financial Services		4	30-85	75-130
	IT: Information technology		4	75-300	140-300
	Eng: Engineering		6	30-60	80-115
	Tel: Telecom		5	250-500	300-450
	HC: Healthcare		7	300-450	300-400
	Ind: Industrial Components		5	25-65	60-100
	Phar: Pharmaceuticals		6	100-130	100-150

We collected data using depth-interviews (Deshpande 1983), lasting between 50 minutes and 90 minutes. Our interviews were exploratory in nature, which allowed the interviewer to focus on each participant's phenomenological interpretations of the character and undercurrents of sales-marketing integration within his/her firm (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The context of our discussion was how marketing and sales worked with each other in the informant's company, how they collaborated on various activities, and what factors facilitated (or inhibited) this process. When an informant indicated that multiple marketing teams within their firms performed various tasks, we asked our informants to focus a specific marketing team(s) they predominantly interacted with while responding to our questions. This allowed us to compare and contrast our informants' perspectives depending on the specific marketing roles they were referring to.

In terms of the interview questions, the researchers used a pre-arranged collection of questions (Appendix A). However, the researchers allowed the participants to

direct the sequence and subject matter of the discussion. Further, we encouraged the participants to provide illustrations, instances and exemplars and other nuances during the discussion. We were also mindful when asking additional questions to further explain and clarify areas of ambiguity, so as to attenuate the opportunity for interviewer-induced bias (McCracken 1988). Further, our interview questions provided participants with an opportunity to make clear and explain any area that the researchers may have misperceived regarding the phenomenon under discussion. We audio-taped all interviews and transcribed them resulting in over 660 pages worth of double-spaced transcripts. When no additional theoretical insights emerging from interviews, we discontinued interviewing, as theoretical saturation was reached (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Data Analysis

In terms of interview and notes management, we utilized NVivo software from QSR International. We adhered to common qualitative research protocols and coded the data in an iterative manner. Specifically, we constantly

revisited our interview transcripts as we collected new data. This approach allowed the researchers to distinguish emerging ideas and themes, and provided a foundation from which we conducted additional data collection. Following the literature, we utilized open coding. We classified important concepts from the interviews and their characteristics, and then we categorized them (Strauss and Corbin 1998). At this stage, our focus was on identifying relevant first-order codes (i.e. the language used by the informants) whenever possible. In the next stage, we used axial coding to find relationship between and among first-order codes, and also to create higher-order themes. The higher-order themes were critical to understanding the emergent framework. Following the literature, we coded the data using a “recursive, process-oriented, analytic procedure” (Corley and Gioia 2004). We utilized this process in an ongoing manner until all of the new and existing relationships in our data surfaced. We aligned with the literature throughout the process and averted imposing emergent patterns into predetermined groups and categories (Gummesson 2003). In discussing the study findings, we focus on ideas that are not discussed in the existing literature, and that are novel, consistently noted by informants, and cross industries in which the participants were employed (Tuli et al. 2007).

At the end of the data analysis activity, we removed all identifying information from the interviews such as company/products and/or individual’s names the informants may have mentioned during the interview, assigned a code number to each interview, and kept the transcripts under lock and key in the office of one of the co-authors.

Reliability and Validity of Data

We adhered to a number of steps suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure that the data were dependable, credible and enabled analytical accuracy. First, we utilized the NVivo software to maintain a) participant contact information; b) interview transcripts; c) field notes; d) related documents, as the researchers collected them. Next, we asked two independent judges to evaluate our coding of the interview transcripts. Both individuals possessed prior research experience with qualitative methodology. However, they were not involved in this study. We compared our data interpretations with those offered by the judges and

found that there was a significant overlap between our and judges’ interpretation of the data. Third, we asked an independent, outside qualitative researcher to perform a review of our research procedures so that we would be sure that the data was dependable and our analysis was reliable. In doing so, this third party reviewed elements including field notes, interview procedures, coding processes, and interview notes to ensure our results were reasonable and credible. By integrating peer debriefing, we were able to secure detailed feedback regarding the data collection and analysis procedures and have our results inspected in an objective manner (Corley and Gioia 2004).

To insure analytical validity—that is, to insure that our data interpretations were (a) arrived at after a rigorous analysis and (b) a valid representation of our informants’ points of views—we implemented five interrelated procedures recommended by Silverman and Marvasti (2008: pgs. 257-270). Below, we explain briefly each procedure, what it was designed to insure, and how we implemented it.

The first step is known as *respondent validation* or member checks (Creswell 2007, p. 208). Implementing this procedure requires that researchers share their findings with a few respondents and seek their feedback. This step insures that respondents have the opportunity to offer their views on researchers’ data interpretation and assess the credibility of findings. We randomly chose 19 participants from the study, shared our findings with them, and solicited their feedback on our data interpretation. These informants overwhelmingly agreed with our analysis and interpretation. *Refutability*, the second procedure requires that the researcher try to actively look for evidence within the data that would refute the assumed relationship among various variables. This procedure insures that the findings are consistent across the entire data set. We assessed refutability by comparing our findings from within one setting (e.g., one industry, or small/large firm) with that from another and found that our findings held consistent across different settings. In the third stage, *constant comparison*, researchers attempt to discern additional cases to corroborate emergent findings as data are collected. This allows for a constant dialog between the data and emergent findings, a necessity in any qualitative

investigation. Since our data analysis was conducted in a recursive manner, that is we went back and forth between analyzing current interviews and conducting additional interviews, it allowed us to compare our emergent findings with new data we were collecting simultaneously. The fourth procedure, *comprehensive data treatment*, requires that after going through the process of *constant comparison*, researchers analyze the data holistically so that interpretations are consistent across the entire dataset. The NVivo software stored all of our data in one place, which enabled us to evaluate all of the data collectively prior to drawing conclusions. *Deviant case analysis*, the final technique, requires that researchers actively look for deviant cases that have the potential to bring into question the overall findings. We actively looked for such cases and found none.

FINDINGS

Our conversations with study informants revealed that a great deal of diversity existed in the role marketing function played within their organizations. For example, in some of our informants' organizations, marketing's major role was product management in that marketing was responsible for managing products through their entire life-cycles, or marketing communication activities that entailed preparing communication plans and insuring their timely availability for the field force. Some other primary responsibilities of the marketing function within our sample of firms included lead generation, field marketing, new product development, and sales support.

Our analysis indicated that the conceptualization of sales-marketing integration is sensitive to the context within which it is examined. Specifically, we argue that the relative contribution of elements suggested by Rouziès et al. (2005) - organizational structure, processes, culture, and people- to interface integration is context-dependent. Further, some of the contributing variables may have a neutral or even a negative effect on interface integration in certain contexts.

Below, we discuss the various themes that emerged from our data. Given the focus of the paper, we have organized our themes and findings around specific roles of marketing and discuss the related nuanced perspectives on interface integration.

Product management: In some of our informants' firms, the major role marketing performed was product management. In this role, once the product was ready for commercialization, marketing was mainly responsible for developing marketing plans for company's products and managing each product through its life-cycle. Typical marketing activities in this role included market segmentation and targeting, deciding on product positioning platforms, developing marketing programs, and field implementation plans.

Our informants suggested that within such contexts, all of the four integration mechanisms (structural, cultural, personal, and communicational) played an equally vital role in forging and sustaining interface integration thus allowing the firm to offer a differentiated value proposition. Further, our informants noted that it behooved the interface personnel to be integrated during all the stages of the marketing strategy making process—laying the ground work for marketing strategies, developing and handing over strategies to sales personnel, and fine-tuning strategies (Malshe and Sohi, 2009). One of our sales informants' used the term “syncing” to express the idea of supportiveness.

Developing and implementing strategies takes time and efforts. And to do it right, it requires a great deal of investment both from sales and marketing. So, both parties must be very invested in syncing processes, structures, and personalities and supporting one another in all the activities leading up to strategy development and actual implementation. [Sales/Senior/Female/ Tel]

Our analytical insights revealed that in such contexts, integration between sales and marketing went well beyond the traditionally-accepted notion of supportiveness (Rouziès et al. 2005). In other words, interfunctional supportiveness was necessary, but not sufficient, to insure optimal customer value delivery. In such cases, successful integration was a function of strong interpersonal and professional connections between sales and marketing personnel and their willingness to take the ownership of the entire strategic process, even when marketing was the one that was making the major strategic decisions. The sales organization's ownership of the strategy-making process was reflected in their willingness to

participate and contribute ideas in joint strategy teams with marketing, to employ sales resources to test out new ideas, and in their willingness to be open to candid debates about the (de)merits of the strategic initiatives and their implementation imperatives.

In the quote below, one of our marketing informants highlights how the idea of taking ownership is embedded within multiple elements of interface integration. As this informant suggests, when interface personnel share great interpersonal rapport across multiple levels and are tightly integrated from structural, cultural, and process standpoints during marketing strategy development and implementation, the firm benefits in terms of value creation and delivery efforts.

Our strategic success really depends on whether sales and marketing jointly take the ownership of the overall strategy development and its implementation. It is one thing for marketing or sales to say...we like your [counterpart function] ideas...but is it something else to actually take ownership of the strong and weak ideas alike and run with those together...that is the kind of commitment [within the interface] that makes a difference in offering a unique customer solution. [Marketing/Senior/Male/Phar.]

Marketing communication: In a few of our informants' firms, marketing personnel were mainly responsible for developing communication materials such as product literature, product specifications and pricing sheets, promotional materials for trade shows, and / or day-to-day use. In these cases, it was marketing's responsibility in these firms to insure that the materials were in salespeople's hands when they needed them.

Our informants noted that in such cases, sales and marketing personnel saw no merit in integrating structurally. As a result, there were no joint sales-marketing teams working on any tasks. Further, given that marketing played no role in firm's strategic activities, sales personnel were unable to envision how marketing would bring any value to activities such as identifying potential market segments and deciding which customers to target, what specific products to promote to certain customer segments, or how to handle the sales process etc. Overall, salespeople were

not excited about marketing's integration within the scope of their customer-facing activities and did not envision marketers as adding any value to their work with customers. Further, given the infrequent nature of their interactions, interface personnel neither developed strong personal rapport nor attempted to bridge cultural gaps within the interface. One of our marketing informants highlighted how they view themselves purely as an external support mechanism and not being tightly integrated with their sales counterparts.

As a department that primarily handles communication activity, we don't play much role in what salespeople do on a day-to-day basis...so, I do not view my department as tightly integrated with sales. At best, we provide external support as and when needed. [Marketing/Senior/Female/Tel]

These very salespeople, however, expressed strongly that they would like marketers to remain mindful about their sales cycles and coordinate their activities so that salespeople would receive the promotional support in a timely manner. It is important to note here that while salespeople seek extensive process integration from marketers at different points within their sales cycles, they do not desire marketers to be deeply engaged in their activities. Rather, they prefer that marketing would remain present on the periphery and offer the needed support from outside as and when needed so that they can perform their customer-facing activities optimally.

We do not want marketers to be interfering with what we do...the only time I seek out marketers is when I need some communication literature...let's say for trade shows, or major customer meetings.... other than that, I do not see how what we do connects with what our marketing colleagues do. [Junior/Sales/Male/Hc]

As such, these insights reveal that in cases where marketing serves purely to coordinate communication activities, salespeople do not see any merit in being integrated with marketing at personal, structural, or cultural levels. The only integration they seek in such cases is process-level integration such as communication activity coordination with sales cycles, and or/seasonality, which facilitates their value creation initiatives with their customers.

Field marketing: In a large number of firms, field marketers that belong to marketing organizations work in the field and serve as liaisons between the field sales organization and corporate marketing department. While they work closely with the field force, field marketers are bound by the major tenets of the proposed marketing strategy, and their work entails constantly attempting to stay within the defined strategic realm, while still being able to customize strategies to support the field force.

When we investigated the notion of interface integration within this context, our sales and marketing informants revealed that for salespeople to optimize their customer value creation potential, it is extremely important for field marketing organization to be integrated at structural, process, cultural, and interpersonal levels. Specifically, our sales informants desired that field marketers would treat salespeople as team members, and acclimate to sales culture. They further desired that field marketers would work shoulder to shoulder with sales personnel and act as the sales function's ambassadors when dealing with corporate marketers. Field marketers, too, noted that to perform their jobs optimally, they need to embrace the sales organization, its philosophy, and its work style with open arms. Both sales and marketing personnel noted that in such instances, interpersonal relationships forged between salespeople and field marketers form the backbone of interface integration.

Lin [field marketer] is great to work with. She understands our environment and the work we do on a day-to-day basis. She supports us in every possible way; oftentimes working with us in the field on some difficult accounts...she often goes out of her way to get the things we need from corporate. We consider her our representative in the headquarters. [Middle/ Sales/ Female, IT]

Contrary to their relationship with field marketers; salespeople are distant from corporate marketing and see little benefit in being integrated with them. They further note that since corporate marketing does not know the intricacies of their specific markets; working on joint teams with corporate marketers may not yield much benefit; it would only take their time away

from customers. They further stated that given their infrequent interactions, bridging the cultural divide and getting to a point of having frank, objective, and productive conversations with corporate marketing may be a resource-intensive process with no clearly defined benefits. The quote below is pertinent in this regard.

While we do invite field salespeople to the headquarters for important feedback sessions from time to time, I am not sure how we can take this periodic collaboration further. We cannot work with individual sales territories since that is simply not feasible...so, we try to maintain a working relationship...but I would not say we are tightly integrated within field activities. [Middle/ Marketing/ Female/ FS]

Overall, this context brings forth the dichotomy of interface integration. While field marketers can optimize salespeople's value creation potential by being fully integrated with the sales organization, the prospects for corporate marketers achieving the same outcomes through integration remain, at best, unclear.

Lead generation: In some of our informants' firms, marketing's major role was lead generation. That is, marketing was responsible for identifying new customers through various channels such as trade shows, industry consortia gatherings, and/or sourcing list of prospects from outside vendors. Marketers were also responsible for qualifying the leads, estimating their potential and handing the leads over to salespeople to initiate the sales process.

Salespeople in such contexts did not see much benefit in structurally integrating with their marketing colleagues since they did not believe that marketers would add any value to the sales process. As such, they wanted marketers to "move out of their way" once the potential new customers were "handed over" to them. One marketing informant expresses his dismay at how their salespeople view marketers and the kind of interaction they desire with marketers.

Our interaction with the field force is limited...we qualify the leads and hand the list [of customers] over to them and they establish first contact with our customers. We don't have much interaction

beyond that...and I have heard salespeople say that they do not like us to meddle in what they do after we hand the list over to them...they do not seem to think of us beyond lead qualification. [Middle/Marketing/ Female/ Ind.]

In addition, given salespeople's sporadic interactions with their marketing counterparts on a day-to-day basis, they do not see much benefit in investing their time and energy in forging connections with their marketing colleagues at personal and/or cultural levels. The only aspect of integration that appeals to salespeople in such situations is that of process integration; that is, salespeople simply desire marketers identify new prospects on a regular basis so there are a number of prospects in the sales funnel at different stages.

We need to have a reliable supply of leads every month...that is their job. I have the hard job of going out and making a sale. So, I don't spend much time interacting with marketing simply because I do not need to...as long as I get good, qualified needs, I am in good shape. I don't really need marketing for anything else. [Junior/Sales/Female/ Eng]

Overall, our findings suggest that when marketers serve as lead generators, the only facet of integration that may significantly, positively affect firm's value creation activity is marketing's ability to identify and supply potential, qualified clients to sales organizations on a regular basis. In such instances, integration at structural, cultural, and/or interpersonal levels does not seem to significantly affect salespeople's value creation ability for their customers.

New product development: One of marketing's primary roles is in the realm of new product development. In this capacity, marketing, in some of our informant firms, served mainly a new product development function that shepherded new products through the stage-gate process. In such firms, marketing did not play much role after the product was ready for launch—that is, the commercialization stage and later. During these stages, it was the sales department that handled most of the product management and day-to-day sales activities.

Our informants noted that in these firms, the nature of integration desired by interface personnel during the product development and commercialization stages was dissimilar. For example, as new products moved through the various hurdles of the stage-gate process, sales personnel desired a close integration with their marketing counterparts on structural and process-levels. Specifically, salespeople expected that marketers would invite them to provide input into the new product development process through establishing formal and informal working groups, and would duly serve as their voice within the NPD process. They also expected that marketers would establish formal processes to seek market feedback on the new product ideas and give salespeople a prominent role in setting up and running such feedback generation processes (e.g. setting up customer advisory groups in the field). Our analysis revealed that the needed structural and process-level coordination during this stage was facilitated when sales and marketing personnel shared good interpersonal rapport, and such integration had positive effects on the NPD process— an important cornerstone of firm's value development efforts. The quote below captures this sentiment.

It is really important to involve salespeople during the early stages of the NPD at multiple levels... in joint teams, in seeking customer feedback, in testing out initial product ideas...it helps if you share a good rapport with the field people since that allows you a great deal of access to them and their customers, which is so crucial during the early stages of the NPD process. [Senior/ Sales/ Male/ HC]

The nature of expected integration during product commercialization and beyond stood in stark contrast to what we noted above. Specifically, salespeople believed that once the product was commercialized, sales organization “owned” the product and that they should possess significant authority over how to take the product to market. Specifically, the very sales personnel who expected their marketing colleagues to be welcoming of salespeople's engagement during the new product development stage were indifferent toward marketers' involvement in their day-to-day sales activities. As the quote below suggests, while salespeople do not openly

oppose marketing's engagement, they suggested that marketing would not have much to contribute once the product was launched, thus suggesting that achieving interface integration during the post-launch stage was not their top priority.

Once the go to market strategy is developed and product is launched, the field pretty much runs with it...they may seek marketers' support intermittently...but the engagement is nearly not as intense as it would be when the product was being developed. [Junior/ Sales/ Male/ Eng.]

Overall, we learned that the necessity and nature of interface integration, as it would contribute to firm's value creation processes, differed between the product development and commercialization stages in those firms where marketing's primary role was NPd.

Sales support: In some of our informants' firms, marketers did not have much of a strategic role to play. Insights from our informants suggested that in these firms, the sales organization wielded much influence over the firms' long-term strategic processes. The marketing function in such firms existed on the periphery, and sales personnel viewed marketing simply as an administrative support function. Accordingly, they expected their marketing colleagues to be available to help them at moment's notice. Instances where marketers may be required to support salespeople included insuring that (a) company intranet sites are updated with most recent product and pricing information, (b) customer queries are responded to in a timely manner, or (c) salespeople receive the needed promotional materials in a timely manner.

Marketing's job is mostly a support job. They need to support us as we go out and sell and bring in the revenue. We should be able to call those guys as and when needed and receive immediate support. The same goes for online stuff. It is their job to insure that all the materials on our sites are accurate and most up to date...because, the last thing I want is to share something erroneous with my customer because it is not updated in the last 2 months...and then go back and tell him that the cost structure I provided last time was a bit off. [Middle/Sales/ Male/Engineering]

Since sales was a much more powerful function within such firms, sales personnel did not seek integration with their marketing colleagues at any level. In these firms, marketers' attempts to build bridges across the two functions were met with tepid responses from their sales colleagues. Many of our sales informants noted that they did not want to "elevate" marketers, who played no strategic role, in the organizational hierarchy by investing energy into developing close working relationships with their marketing colleagues. In sum, interface integration was not a crucial contributing element to salespeople's ability to create optimal customer value. One of our sales informants indicated that she did not see much value in integrating with marketing function and hence, had not made much attempts in that direction.

We view marketing as a sales support function. We drive the overall strategy...we own the strategy...and marketing is just a support function. They are just a part of the overall communication mix...and we choose when and where we may employ their services...that said, we do not engage with them [marketers] extensively since we do not see much value in it. [Sales/ Senior/ Female/ Tel]

DISCUSSION

Sales organization plays a crucial role in a firm's value creation activities, and scholars note that this role may be enhanced through optimal levels of integration within the sales-marketing interface. In this paper, we argue that the role(s) the marketing function plays in a firm has a profound effect on interface integration. Consequently, we suggest that marketers and salespeople may need to emphasize (and de-emphasize) specific integration elements, depending on the context, in order to forge and sustain meaningful interface integration that positively impacts salespeople's value creation activities. In Table 2, we summarize our findings.

As the contents of the Table indicate, simultaneously emphasizing the structural, process-related, cultural and interpersonal elements to forge integration that enhances sales force's contribution to value creation activities may be advisable only in cases where marketing is in charge of product management and/or when one is talking about integration between field

Table 2: Summary of Findings

Marketing's primary role: Specific job responsibilities	Frequency (% firms)	Repr. industries	Which integration element(s), if pursued, may contribute to salespeople's value creation activities (+: Positive contribution; -: Negative contribution; NA: No positive or negative contribution; hence not worth pursuing)			
			Structural	Process	Cultural	Interpersonal
Product management: Devise product marketing strategies; product life-cycle management	40%	Phar HC	+	+	+	+
Marketing communication: Develop promotional materials; insure availability of promotional materials in time	25%	Tel IT	NA	+	NA	NA
Field marketing: Serve as a liaison between HQ marketing and field sales organizations; provide daily strategic and tactical support to salespeople	20%	IT FS	+	+	+	+
Lead generation: Identify, qualify, and assess potential of new leads; hand over new leads to salespeople	30%	Eng Ind	NA	+	NA	NA
New product development: Shepherd new products through the stage-gate process during the pre-commercialization stage	35%	HC Phar	Stage-gate +	+	NA	+
			Commercialization NA	+	NA	NA
Sales support: Serve as administrative support function that handles back-office activities for sales- e.g., respond to customer queries or insure availability of promotional materials	30%	Eng Ind	NA	NA	NA	NA

Key: FS (Financial Services); IT (Information Technology); Eng (Engineering); Tel (Telecom); HC (Healthcare); Ind (Industrial Components; Phar (Pharmaceuticals)

marketing and sales organization. On the other hand, it may be counterproductive to aspire to anything other than purely process-level interface integration when marketers perform purely a marketing communication activity or act as lead generators as such efforts may actually impede sales organization's efforts to create customer value. It must also be noted that in certain contexts, the nature and need for interface integration depends on where the product is in its life-cycle. A case in point is the context wherein marketing is primarily responsible for NPD where it may be productive for marketers to stay in the background once the product is launched and not try to actively integrate themselves with the sales force. Last, in firms where sales drives strategies and tactics, integration plays no role in helping salespeople create customer value.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The current conceptualizations of sales-marketing interface integration emphasizes the key contributions of four elements- organizational structure, process, culture, and people (Beverland et al. 2006; Homburg and

Jensen 2007; Rouziès et al., 2005; Strahle et al. 1996). While it provides a strong foundation to further explore integration phenomenon, the current conceptualization fails to recognize (a) organizational diversity in terms of how companies may configure their sales and marketing departments (Biemans et al., 2010), (b) the related disparity in sales and marketing roles and responsibilities across firms (CMO 2003; Webster et al. 2005), and (c) the subsequent, plausible effects of the disparate configurations and roles on the contribution each element may make to interface integration across different firms.

Against this backdrop, the first contribution of our paper is that we bring forth the important role organizational context plays in this theoretical domain. Further, we offer a nuanced perspective on how a specific contextual variable- marketing's role within the firm, may moderate the contribution of specific elements to interface integration. Our findings indicate that the structural, cultural, interpersonal, and process-related elements that are identified as contributors to interface

integration may not be relevant in some contexts. For example, cultural, structural, and interpersonal elements may not contribute significantly to enhancing integration in a large number of firms except when (a) marketing is in charge of the entire product life cycle, and (b) the company has an active field marketing function. Our findings further reveal that among the four contributing elements, it is the process elements that seem to have applicability in enhancing interface integration across a wide range of contexts. We also empirically show that the previously identified “contributors” to interface integration may act as integration “detractors” in certain contexts. For example, corporate marketers’ pursuit of integration with the field force, especially when the field sales force works extensively with field marketers is likely to alienate the field force.

Collectively, our findings suggest that contrary to prevailing notions, in many instances, it is best to not invest in each of the structural, interpersonal, cultural, and (to a certain extent) process elements to forge integration since the outcomes of such integration efforts may plausibly result in negligible or even negative outcomes. Given that the sales force plays a crucial role in the firm’s value creation activity, our findings help unpack the selective paths marketers may pursue, as well refrain from, while trying to integrate with the sales force in their efforts to support the sales organizations in their value creation endeavors.

Second, in some firms, the marketing function is organized in teams with each team being responsible for a specific set of activities (e.g., marketing communication, or lead generation). In these cases, a motley pattern of sales-marketing integration may occur because the sales function may be tightly, loosely, or not at all integrated with the variety of marketing teams. This is a unique contribution as the extant interface integration literature has not recognized the plausibility of such a phenomenon while discussing sales-marketing integration. Further, the extant interface research has highlighted the importance of supportiveness between sales and marketing in achieving salespeople’s buy-in of their proposed marketing strategies in order to engage in successful marketing strategy making process (Malshe and Sohi, 2009a, 2009b). However, the literature has not taken into account that this motley pattern of

integration may in fact impact the ability of the sales and marketing functions to perform their strategic and tactical activities in an optimal manner and develop superior customer value (Guenzi and Troilo, 2006).

Third, our findings reveal instances where interface personnel do not desire to be integrated with one another. For example, in certain industries, sales personnel do not view marketing as a strategic function, and thus choose not to deploy their time engaging with marketers. In other instances, we find that sales personnel desire engagement with their marketing colleagues during some stages of the strategic process while at some other stages, they do not desire to be integrated with their marketing counterparts. To the best of our knowledge, scholars have not acknowledge any areas during the marketing strategy making process where sales and/or marketing personnel see no value in being integrated. The extant literature often highlights the positive role that interface integration achieves in strategic outcomes (Rouziès et al., 2005; Guenzi and Troilo, 2006). In contrast, our study’s findings offer a novel insight by suggesting that forced interface integration may prove to be counterproductive.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

We suggest that the findings of this study have important implications for managerial practice. First, while the literature supports the importance of sales-marketing integration for firm’s value creation (Guenzi and Troilo, 2006), our analysis suggests that managers must examine their firm and marketing’s role in a very holistic manner. Specifically, the role played by the marketing function may differ and thus managerial expectations regarding integration must adapt to this contexts. Hence, a pragmatic approach to viewing integration within the firm is critical.

Second, managerial understanding regarding the role marketing plays within the firm is critical to enhancing integration. As our findings suggests, the context will impact which integration mechanisms must be emphasized to enhance integration. This understanding is critical to managers, as they will be able to more effectively offer advice and direction to each function that more effectively enhanced integration.

Third, our findings suggest that there could be instances where forging integration may not have any significant effect on firm's value creation activities. Having knowledge of such situations may benefit senior leaders in deciding whether and when to deploy intra-organizational resources in forging interface integration. Thus, managers may choose to deploy resources in other areas that may be more fruitful for value creation.

Finally, our findings provide managers with a new anchor for their expectations. That is, managers need not always strive to find the optimal level of integration. Instead, integration may often exhibit a motley pattern within the organization and that form of integration may be more beneficial than achieving wholesale integration.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This research has the following limitations. First, we used depth interviews as data for our study. We suggest that future studies may choose to use complementary techniques, such as organizational ethnography, that would allow for observing informants in their natural environments. Such alternative methods of data collection could build upon our findings and shed additional insights into the phenomenon. Second, our sample size of forty three informants may be viewed as a small sample. Yet, when viewed in context with other qualitative marketing research (e.g. Beverland et al. 2006; Flint, Woodruff, and Gardial 2002; Geiger and Turley 2005) our sample size is relatively within the bounds of previously published work. Third, one may point to the inadequacies of using individual informants to examine functional-level phenomenon. However, the use of key informants in examinations studying organizational phenomenon is commonly accepted (e.g. Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Tuli et al. 2007). Finally, the researchers ensured analytical rigor by incorporating member checks at the conclusion of the study. Last, we tried to address the limitation of generalizability through the use of diverse set of informants across industries and across organizational hierarchy.

A number of opportunities are also available to scholars to build upon our study and its findings. For instance, a quantitative analysis of this phenomenon may assist to further validate or extend our current findings. One

interesting research avenue would be to create measures of the constructs within our study to further expand upon the nuances in which we have touched upon. Scholars may also consider incorporating external factors, such as competitive intensity, environmental uncertainty, and/or economic environment to better understand whether these dynamics affect interface integration dynamic and its relationship with firm's value creation activities.

To conclude, our qualitative study highlights how one specific boundary condition, that of the role of marketing within the firm, may bring forth a richer, nuanced picture of sales-marketing interface integration and shed brighter light on the relationship between integration and firm's value creation activities.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

What does sales-marketing integration mean to you?

Are you (as a function) integrated with your counterpart function?

In your organization, what contributes to sales-marketing integration?

In your organization, are there any factors that may facilitate achieving sales-marketing integration?

What factors deter achieving sales-marketing integration?