

The Factors Affecting the Relationships between Suppliers and Distributors

A Market Oriented Approach

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Abstract

Over the last decade there has been a growing interest in the concept of market orientation as a tool for increasing economic performance. We believe that market orientation of a firm is the main core of its business. Developing a stronger market orientation can improve a firm's performance by focusing its efforts on responding to market needs. In turn, the firm can deliver a superior value to its customers. In this research we assessed the factors that can influence a firm's market orientation, its supply chain management (distributors), and identified their relationships to customer satisfaction. Effective supply chain management of a firm can improve its performance through several means including building strong supplier relationships that enhance the firm's ability to respond effectively to its customers. Weaker supply chain relationships may result if the supply chains do not understand or do not consider the firm's market orientation. In most studies market orientation is defined as the adoption of a marketing concept or as the adoption of a high-quality marketing practice. In many studies, however, marketing orientation has not been clearly defined, and in others, marketing definitions were used without empirical validation.

In this study we will focus on several definitions from which we will design an empirical research framework. In this framework we defined two groups of variables. The independent variables are dimensions of market orientation inside the factory. They include: Internal functional coordination, intelligence generation, information dissemination, and design and implementation of a response. The dependent variables are the relationship elements between distributors and suppliers. They include: trust, cooperative norms and commitment. These three variables constitute the components of supplier relationship management, and as such, stronger relationships will result in improved customer satisfaction. This kind of research is missing in developing countries but could be very helpful for their firms in sustaining a competitive advantage.

In the present research we used two kinds of questionnaires, one for the manufacturers (suppliers) and one for the distributors. Our results indicate that the most important factors that influence the relationships between the suppliers (factory) and distributors are the four dimensions of market orientation. That is, internal functional coordination, intelligence generation, information dissemination, and designed proper response. Applying these dimensions among all management levels of the suppliers will lead to improved trust, commitment, cooperative norms and the satisfaction of distributors.

Key words: market orientation, supply chain management, distributors, trust, commitment, cooperative norms

Introduction

Effective supply chain management can improve firm's performance through several means including building strong supplier relationship that enhance a firm's ability to respond to its customer more effectively. Developing a stronger market orientation can improve a firm's performance because the firm is focusing its efforts on responding and adapting to its market's needs more effectively than its competitors are adapting to the market's needs.

Recently, researchers have begun to examine the linkages between market orientation and certain aspect of SCM (Supply Chain Management, Baker TL and et al 1999). A strategy for easing the tension facing suppliers and distributors in their channel relationships may be the adoption of market oriented behaviours. The current study considers the possible synergies created by firms with a strong market orientation and effective SCM. The concern is whether firms can capitalize on a strong market orientation through strong supplier relationship with the distributors. Specifically, the possibility that SCM effectiveness can be enhanced in firms with a strong market orientation and that SCM may be one way to leverage a well-developed market orientation to improve performance was focus of this research. The foundation for a theoretical model is described by first discussing how a firm creates competitive advantage through supplier relationships and then how market orientation works to affect the performance of the firm and its distributions. The common elements between these two processes are explored to develop a model that suggest translating a strong supplier orientation into strong supplier relationship is one way to enhance the effect of a strong market orientation on performance.

Literature review

Market Orientation: Toward an Integrated Framework

Some of the elements of modern business and marketing practices can perhaps be traced as far back as the ancient Greeks, the Phoenicians, and the Venetian traders. The earliest recorded identification of the "marketing concept" was put forth in the 1700s by Adam Smith. In his writings, the famous economist discusses making the customer the focus of a business. Reintroduced in the modern era in the 1950s, the marketing concept has become the philosophical foundation for marketing academics and practitioners alike.

Proponents of the marketing concept have long argued that creating a satisfied customer should be the primary objective of business (Drucker 1954, Keith 1960, Levitt 1960). Throughout the past four decades, however, the marketing concept has been more an article of faith than a practical basis for managing a business (Day 1994). Consequently, academics in recent years have begun to develop a body of research on "market orientation", related to the antecedents and performance consequences of the marketing concept (Deshpande and et al 1989, Jaworski and et al 1993, Narver and et al 1990). According to Kohli and Jaworski (1990), the marketing concept is a business philosophy, whereas the term market orientation refers to the actual implementation of the marketing concept.

Consistent with the marketing concept, customers have traditionally been considered to be the primary focus of a market orientation (Deshpande and Webster 1989, Payne 1988). Other researchers, however, have begun to embrace a broader perspective on the market orientation construct by including exogenous factors that influence customer needs, such as competitors and even government regulation (Kohli and et al 1990, Lusch and at al 1987, Slater and at al 1994). In addition, the popular business press is replete with works promulgating a competitor orientation in the practice of strategic marketing, often relying on a conflict similarity. Consequently, despite the academic emphasis on customer orientation, practitioners may actually be influenced to operate with a strong focus on competitors.

With such disparity in focus, it is evident that the broad term, "market orientation," may actually encompass several different approaches to the strategic alignment of the organization with the external environment. The unique contribution of this article is in the development of the market orientation typology matrix as a pedagogical and heuristic tool to summarize these distinct approaches. Specifically, this conceptualization of the market orientation construct suggests four distinct strategic types, involving tradeoffs in the allocation of resources to the strategic monitoring of customers and/or competitors.

The Market Orientation Construct

Market orientation is an aspect of organizational culture that is believed to have far-reaching effects on the firm. According to Deshpande and Webster (1989), the most relevant aspect of organizational culture from a marketing perspective is the marketing concept, which includes "a fundamental shared set of beliefs and values that puts the customer in the center of the firm's thinking about strategy and operations".

Although information on the external environment is obviously vital to sound managerial decision-making, the relevant external environment not only consists of customers, but competitors as well. In fact, Day and Wensley (1988) suggest that in addition to customer characteristics, the number and power of competitors could strongly affect the focus of the intelligence gathering activity.

Perhaps Kotler (1977) offered the first significant mention of a competitor focus with respect to the marketing concept. According to Kotler (1977), an effective marketing organization focuses on the external environment, which is said to include both customers and competitors. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) echo this point by describing market orientation as the ability of an organization to generate, disseminate, and use superior information about both customers and competitors.

Similarities and differences between marketing and market orientation concepts

Marketing is a very new concept that has come into the management literatures. This concept covers the facts that marketing is the most important task of an organization. The position of marketing tasks should be done by top level managers of an organization in order to define the directions plans and functions of other departments.

Today a new version of marketing is arisen among the management gurus who have different definition of marketing. In this doctrine guru believes that marketing is more than a task of certain managers tasks, it is the entire organization responsibility to handle market requirements. By other word every department in an organization have the responsibility to concentrate on customer wants and demands. It is their responsibility to figure out solutions to customer's problems. This new concept is called market orientation. This concept in fact involves more organizational tasks and tries to bring every department into the business. The most important goal in this definition is to create more values to customers.

In the market orientation philosophy companies have to recognize the customer wants and tendencies and the entire organization has to attempt its Excellencies to deliver services or produced goods in the way that satisfy customers. Obviously in the old and new definition of marketing both focuses on target customer requirements.

Supplier relationships

SCM produces competitive advantages that positively impact the performance of the firm (Larson PD et al 1998). To create a competitive advantage, SCM is increasingly emphasizing intr-functional, cross functional, and inter-organizational coordination of activities (Sheth J et al. 1997, Ballou RH et al. 2000). The competitive advantage created by SCM includes the creation of efficiencies in the supply chain oriented toward providing better

consumer value than competitors. Within the supply chain domain, customer value is created through two mechanisms: reducing costs and increasing responsiveness to customers' needs (Araujo L, et al. 1999). The creation of customer value through SCM results in a positive impact on the firm's profitability and customer loyalty.

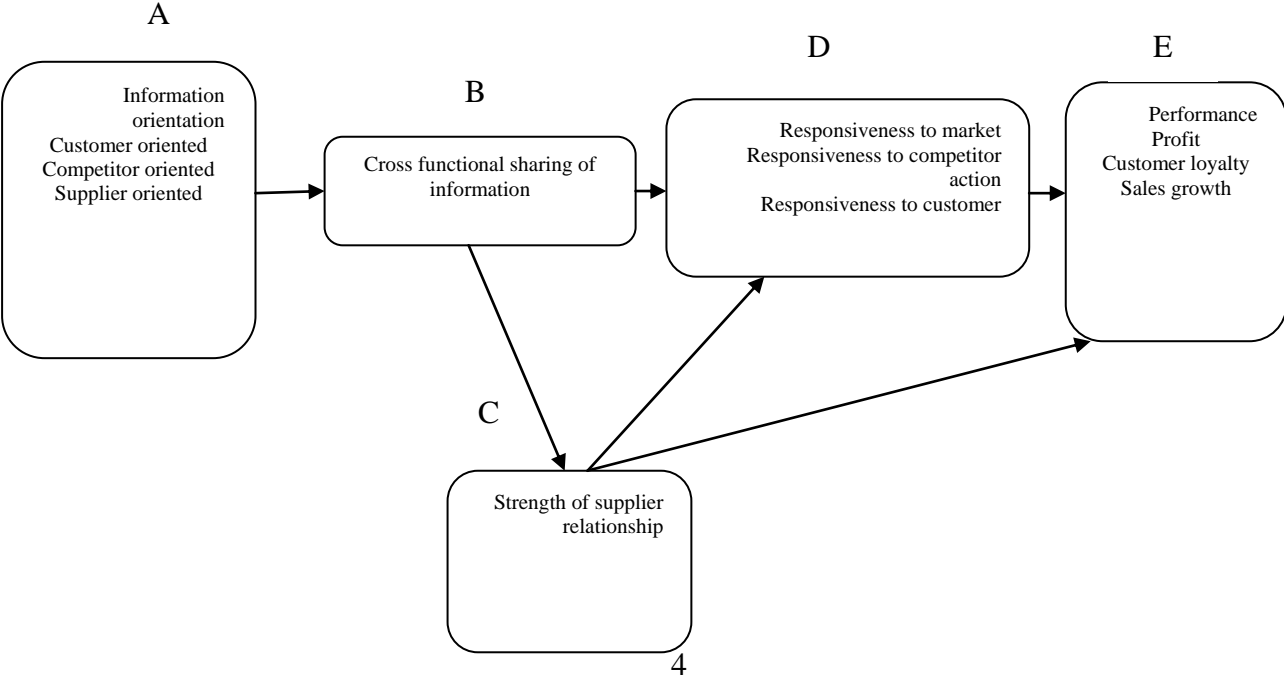
In addition to logistics management, activities within the supply chain will increasingly include the development and maintenance of supplier information database and the use of supplier information to manage supplier relationships (Lambert DM et al. 2000). Within the supply chain, a company has suppliers who may have their own suppliers and customers who may have customer of their own (Lancioni RA, 2000). Building effective supplier relationships that are oriented toward the creation of customer value requires a company to maintain and use information about suppliers, but also requires information about the company's customers, end users, and competitors (Tan KC at al 1998).

However, having information is not enough to drive supplier relationships. SCM is contingent on having a culture that fosters cross functional sharing of information (siguaw JA, et al. 1998). The cross functional sharing of information makes it easier for different functional area s of the firm to work with suppliers. To be willing to share information with suppliers, the company must have a culture for sharing information internally across functional area of the firm (Ellinger AE, 2000). In addition, because the information shares with suppliers is likely to be quite variable in its functional source, a company that uses information for cross functional coordination should have people from different functional areas who can easily work with suppliers, thus fulfilling various interface that strengthen the relationship with suppliers. Finally, in a recent survey of logistics managers, cross functional collaboration was an essential antecedent leading to enhance distribution performance, indicating the importance of cross functional collaboration in SCM.

Supply chain management¹ and market orientation concepts

In today hyper competitive environment, the sphere of competition has gone through to different aspects of business. Now a day's even distribution channels are experiencing a very intense competition that makes them to figure out new way of distributing products and investing on possible improvements. One of the most practical strategies that distributors can have is to use market orientation concepts in their workforce. In order to implement that

Figurere1- Overlap between market orientation and supplier relationship development²

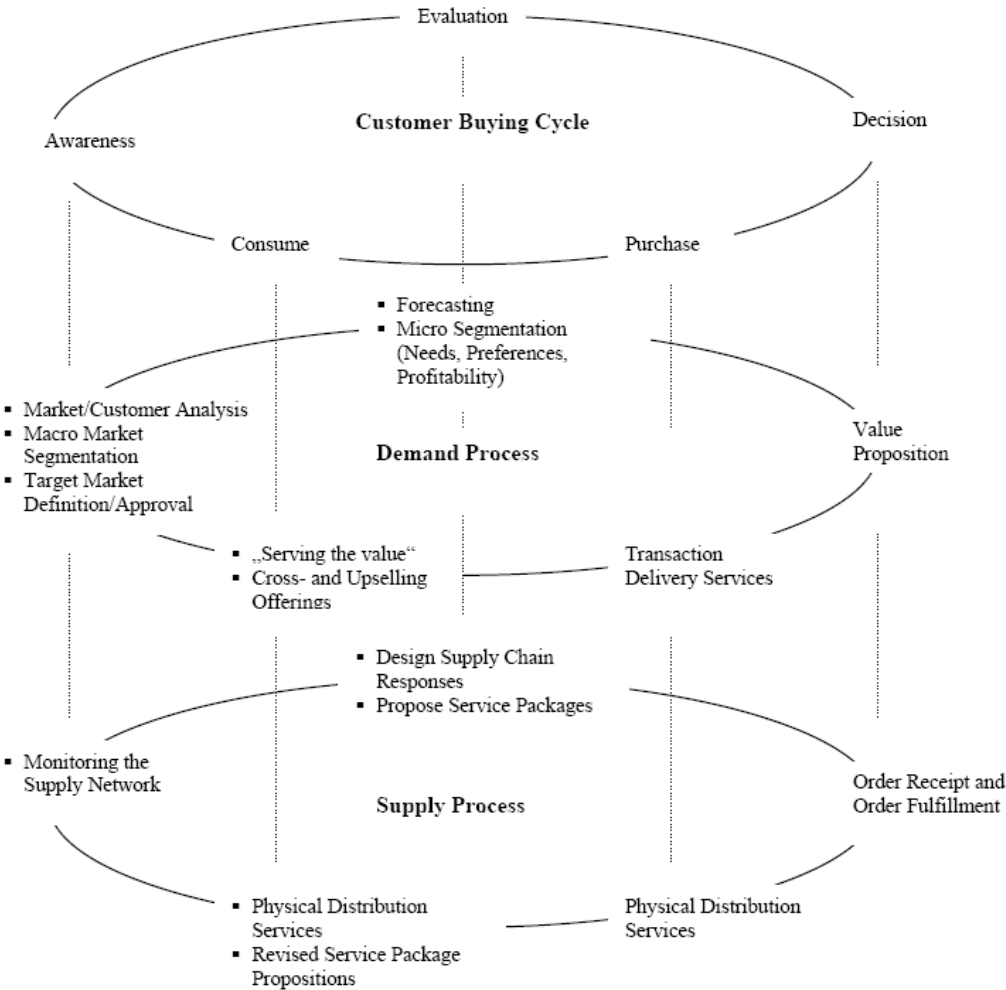


solution the main requirement is an integrated system from raw materials to final products and customers. This is called supply chain in management literatures. By other word an integrated SCM can help distributors to implement market orientation. Because the performance of distributor depends on the quality of products and the quality is provided and supported by producers. Therefore their success in the market depends on how well the other players in the SCM have tried market orientation in their organizational culture and climate.

Market orientation will create an environment that companies attempt will be focused on longer relationships, mutual learning, building trust and care more for their responsibilities against the customers and finally practice of cooperation norms. These characteristics especially long term relationship will strengthen the SCM performance.

The recent study by Rainbird (2004) is the only work we found which explicitly suggests a process fusion model for demand and supply process integration. He distinguishes between eight supply processes, ranging from order receipt/entry to delivery options, as well as seven demand processes, e.g. macro-market definition and CRM(Customer Relationship Marketing). Rainbird argues that the “fusion” or linkage between these processes can be achieved through either management, specific organizational capabilities or technology. With the help of the “consumption chain”, which looks at the “total experience” from a customer perspective, the need to integrate the activities is demonstrated. Building on this work as well as the findings from our co development workshop, we suggest a three layered process integration model, comprising the customer buying life cycle and the demand and supply processes.

Figure 2- Demand and supply process integration³



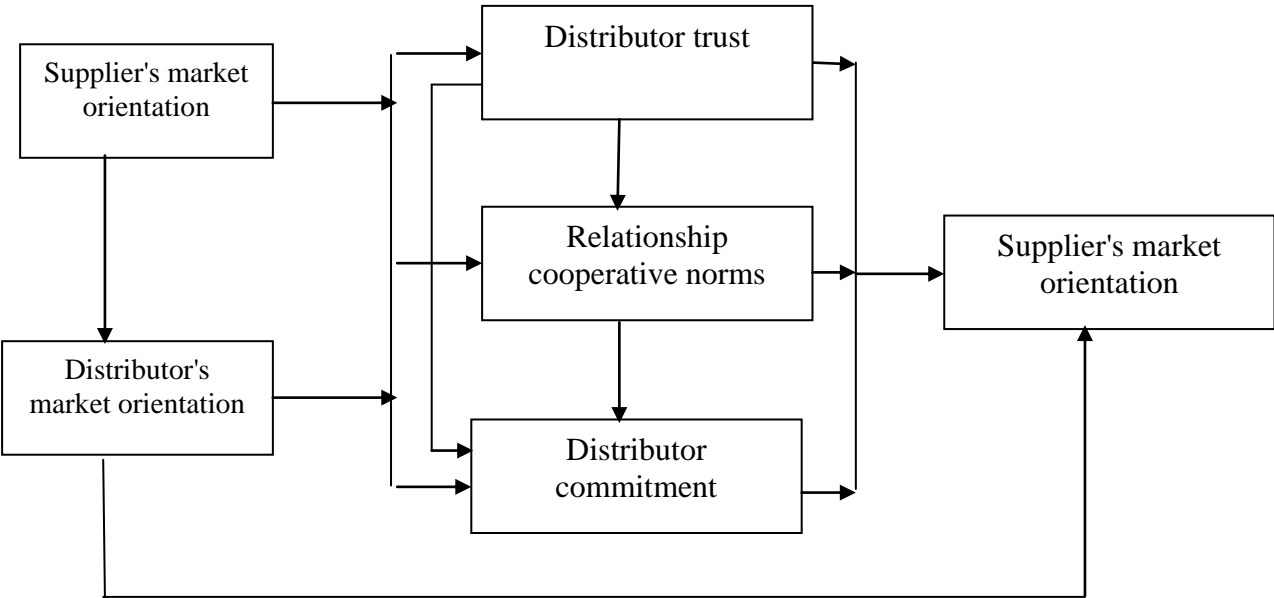
The three layers of the model stress firstly, the integration of the customer into the value creation process as proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004). Secondly, in line with the conceptualizations of relationship marketing and CRM, the buying cycle acknowledges the dynamics in customer relationships (Zablah et al. 2004). Thirdly, by linking the activities in the demand process with those in the supply process, guidance to implementing the process integration can be derived. Any process can usually be divided into sub processes and activities and therefore, the level of abstraction is arbitrary. In our model, the activity level was selected to match the phases in the customer buying cycle, and, furthermore, to illustrate those activities whose integration is fundamental for DCM.

Market orientation and supply chain relationship component

Global competition and maturing domestic markets are creating increasingly competitive conditions for channel partners. Competitive pressure encourage suppliers to decrease their investment in traditional channels, find alternatives or dual channels of distribution, and require distribution to increase their channel investments. These trends have resulted in increased tensions in and deterioration of channels relationship. A viable strategy for easing channel tensions while countering future environmental threats from global competition may be the adoption of market oriented behaviors. To date, research incorporating the market oriented construct has indicated the market oriented behaviors have positive effects on profitability, employee attitudes, and sales person orientations.

Figure 1 is likely to indicate the effects of a supplier's market orientation on both the distributor's market orientation and its perception of various channel relationship factors, including trust, cooperative norms, commitment and satisfaction with performance.

Figure 3- Relationship variables among suppliers and distributors in term of market oriented construct.



1. Trust and market oriented

Base on previous research trust to an organization will be build up only if the company relationship is using an open system and disclosure of information which is extremely important to develop a market oriented concept inside a company. One of the necessities for successful SCM is the fellow of information from first chain to last and vice

versa. While the SCM attend to implement a market orientation concept the main point is the description of customer wants and demands. The main responsibility of a distributor is to gather information about customer demands and pass it to the backward organizations in the chain. The fellow of information requires trust among companies in the SCM.

2. Market orientation and cooperative norms

The concept of cooperative norms delegate to the mind that, both parties have to integrate their efforts in order to gain success. Whenever a producer is implementing a market oriented concept in their organization will the distributors to perform satisfactory in term of relationship with customers and gain acceptable market share. However the difference between the understandings of cooperative norms among two companies will lead to conflicts and failure of SCM collaboration.

3. Commitment and market orientation

Commitment among two parties will create a long term relationship. Market oriented suppliers will allocate more resources for distributors in order to support them in the facing with the market. On the other hand distributors have the responsibility of passing on the information about market situation, changes and new strategies that has to be used by suppliers. This relationship along with commitment will last for long period of time.

1- Market orientation and satisfaction

There are four dimensions of satisfaction diagnosed in distribution channel

- I. Product dimension which applies to the quality of product that had been asked and it was delivered by manufacturer
- II. Financial dimension that include attractiveness of several conditions as; profit margin and profitability
- III. Assistance dimension is related to the quality of support that suppliers will deliver to distributors
- IV. Social interaction dimension compromises of values that are employed in the supplier and distributor relationship

The component of supply chain relationship and satisfaction

As it was described in the previous section the relationship of market oriented and the component of SCM was described. In this part the main aim of the research which is creation more values to customer and therefore more satisfaction brought to customers are discussed in more details the relationship between the factors and the satisfaction is analyzed.

A. Trust and satisfaction

Base on the research relationship among SCM is dependent on the level of trust between members. A faithful relationship will create satisfaction inside the SCM among the associates.

B. Cooperative norms and satisfaction

A good managed and integrated team will perform in manners that result more than any individual efforts. Thus all of team member will benefit from the collaboration. If the benefit distributed by reasonable approach it will bring satisfaction to team members.

C. Commitment and satisfaction

A well performance will create commitment between two parties and that will bring satisfaction into relationship

The research framework

Base on previous research on market orientation there are three main functions to be done in the entire organization.

Gathering information to forecast the present and future need of customers

Distribution of information to all department of the organization
 Respond of entire organization to the present and future needs of customers

In order to design the research framework a lots of resources were gone through. But in the conceptual framework of the research two major researcher's opinion Deshpande and Kasper are focused more in this research (Deshpande et al. 1989). They believe market orientation is a philosophy related to the organizational culture in the format that delivering the most valuable services to customer is a must. Also Narver et al (1990) and Slater put a behavioral dimension to the market orientation theory including of four parts; customer orientation, competition oriented, task coordination and profitable decision making. The following table indicates the opinion of other researchers that was considered in the research framework design process.

Table1- the references for the research framework

Berry& Parasuraman 1991 P.41	Keep and support the relationship with customers
Morgan & Hunt 1994 P.23	All the marketing activities should be directed in order to develop and keep a successful relationship with customers
Cravens 1995 P.11	This is more than cooperation between sellers and buyers and covers all the layers of SCM such as producers and distributors
Gronoroos 1990 P.138	Marketing is all about keeping relationship with profitable customers and trading parties

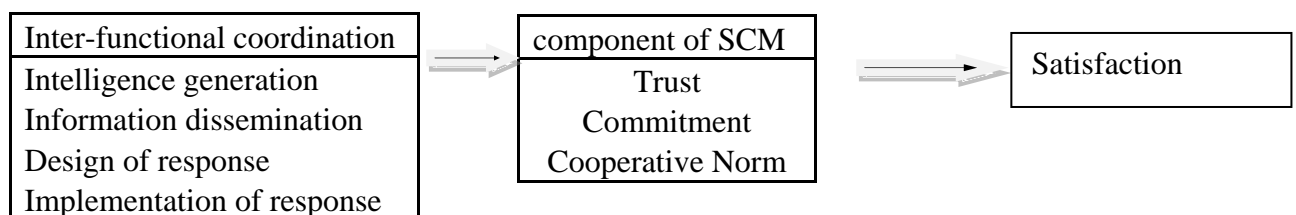
Sigma found out that market oriented suppliers have impacts of distributor commitment and a market oriented distributor will create trust and good understanding of cooperative norms. In market orientation a strong long term relationship combined with commitment between distributor and suppliers is essential. He also believes that trust can increase between two parties if the following steps taken.

- Profit and information sharing between two parties
- Integration of two parties' goals and motivations
- Response and trouble-free relationship system with customers

Canon and Porlut figured out that success in a business is related to good understanding and performing cooperation norms.

Two group of idea in term of market orientation can be diagnosed. The first group believes supply chain management is combining of; trust, commitment and cooperative norms. They think in order to have good communication within a SCM these facts have to be managed well. The other group of guru believes that these components of SCM will bring satisfaction to members and customers and will lead to profitable business. This research is to examine the relationship and its certainty within a SCM. The figure 4 indicates the relationship of supply chain component and satisfaction.

Figure 4- the research framework



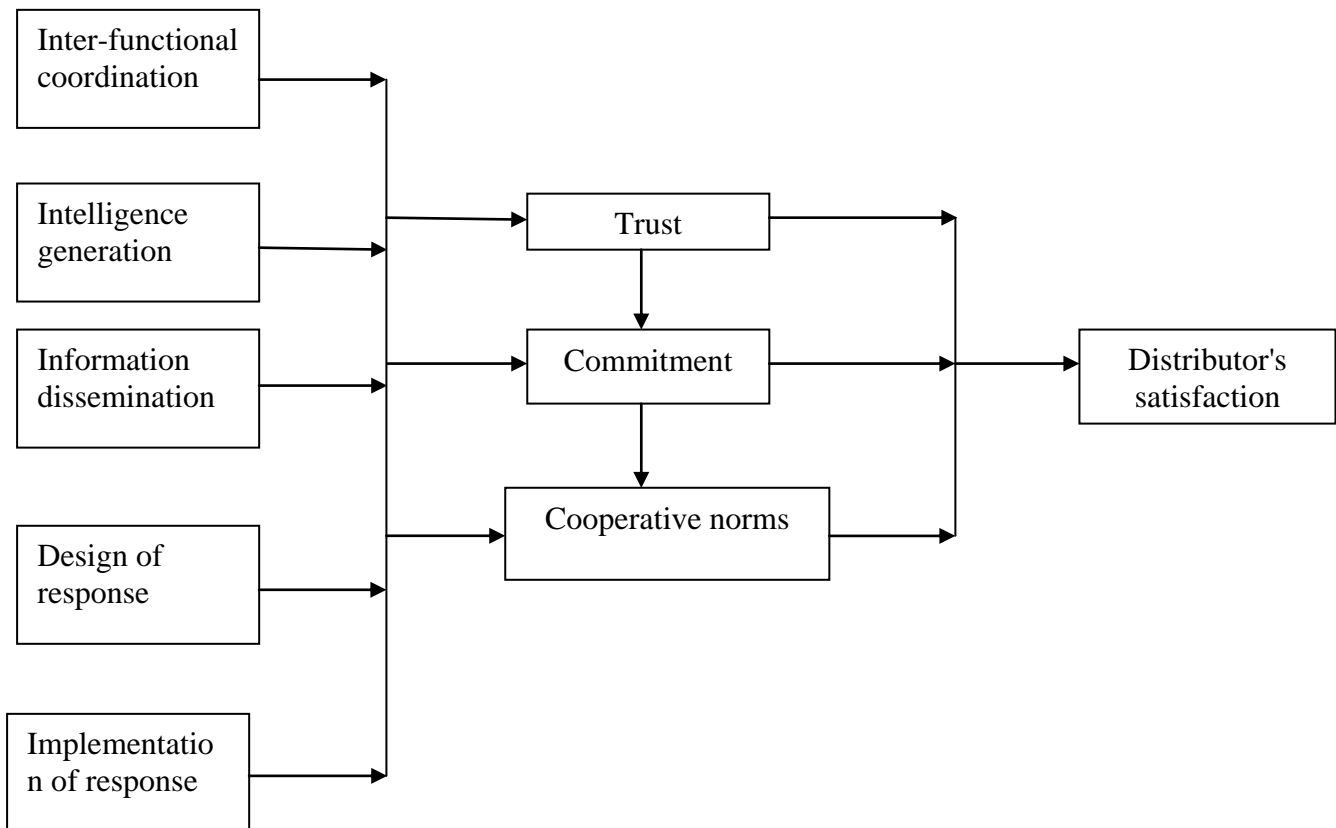
Research hypothesis

The research objective is to assess the relationship among factors that can influence market orientation and supply chain and also find the component of supply chain and the relationship that all have with customer satisfaction. In order to find out the presence of relationship among supply chain component and market orientation tasks the following hypothesis has to be tested. There are three level of hypothesis.

In the first level the relationships between independent variables and SCM component is tested in order to find out if there is any relationship between them. In the second level the relationship between the SCM components is tested in order to find the influence of each fact on the others. Therefore they have been evaluated binary which is indicated in the final research frame work. On the third level the relationship between the SCM components and distributor's satisfaction is tested.

Finally the research framework could be draw as below

Figure 5- the final research framework



Procedures for collecting data

In this research the dependence of factors on each other is measured, the required data was collected by questionnaire and correlation test was done. In the research design and data gathering phase of the research it was tried to be applied as much as possible.

Research population

The research population is dairy companies and distributors in three provinces of Iran. The three provinces are; Tehran, Mazandaran and Gilan.

Sampling method

For calculating the number of sample the Morgan and Jersy table was used. Based on the table for the population which is consists of 42 companies and 97 distributors among of them 39 companies and 82 distributors were finally selected. The sampling method was simple random selection method. The list of population is attached in appendix.

Questionnaire

Two different questionnaires were developed. The first questionnaire was focused on market orientation dimension and it was send to manufacturers. The second questionnaire focuses on trust, commitment and cooperative norms and their dependency to satisfaction. This questionnaire was send to distributors. The questions were taken out of two international articles with little modification. In order to approve the reliability and validity of questionnaire, it was send to 10 experts and their idea was gathered and edited. Also Alfa coefficient of the research was calculated and the result was higher than 70 percent which indicates questionnaire validity.

The measurement scale used in this research questionnaire was original Likert scale and Spearman test was employed. The table 2- indicates the test result and interpretation.

Research reliability and validity

For the research reliability and validity before the questionnaire was send to the respondent it was asked from expert to give their opinion on the questionnaire. About 40 experts were chosen and the questionnaire was send to them. After gathering their opinions the questions were edited. The experts were form different area of knowledge. These experts could be divided in this manner; The first group where the marketing practioners, the second group where the food science expert, finally the last group where the supply chain experts.

Table 2- the statistical test of hypothesis and the result

Test no	Dependent variables	independent variables	coefficient	Reject or accept the H0	Test result
1	Trust	Inter-functional coordination	0.31	Re	there is a significant relation
2	Commitment	Inter-functional coordination	25	Re	
3	Cooperation	Inter-functional coordination	0.15	Re	
4	Trust	Intelligence generation	0.24	Re	there is a significant relation
5	Commitment	Intelligence generation	0.273	Re	
6	Cooperation	Intelligence generation	0.143	Re	
7	Trust	information dissemination	0.304	Re	there is a significant relation
8	Commitment	information dissemination	0.334	Re	
9	Cooperation	information dissemination	0.192	Re	
10	Trust	Design of response	0.259	Re	there is a significant relation
11	Commitment	Design of response	0.285	Re	
12	Cooperation	Design of response	0.188	Re	
13	Trust	Implementation of response	0.129	Acc	there is no significant relation
14	Commitment	Implementation of response	0.12	Acc	
15	Cooperation	Implementation of response	0.13	Acc	
16	Commitment	trust	0.92	Re	there is a significant relation
17	Cooperation	trust	0.34	Re	
18	Cooperation	commitment	0.35	Re	
19	Satisfaction	Trust	0.26	Re	there is a significant relation
20	Satisfaction	Commitment	0.29	Re	
21	Satisfaction	Cooperation	0.65	Re	

According to the following table there is relationship among all dependent and independent variables and also with satisfaction except the implementation of response with the SCM component. There is no relationship between them. Base on the above result any SCM and distributors should be aware of important issues.

- Inter-functional coordination
- Intelligence generation
- Information dissemination
- Design of response

Recommendations

The recommendations will be divided into four different categories. This classification is made upon the important issue resulted from the statistics tests.

- A. Using inter-functional coordination in order to increase trust, commitment and cooperative norms
 - 1- Integrating all the functions inside the company in order to recognize the market needs and requirements
 - 2- Improving the managers knowledge about end users satisfaction progress
 - 3- Trend watching every 3 month by meeting held between different departments
 - 4- Cooperation for changes in employee in different department within programmed period of time
- B. Intelligence generation aspect
 - 1- Implementing a systematic Intelligence generation
 - 2- Meeting with distributor and customers regularly to recognize their needs
 - 3- Measuring internal and customer's satisfaction periodically
 - 4- Team work for launching new product into the market with distributor
 - 5- Gathering information on a regular bases about quality of product, trade policy and its effects and competitors policy and functions
 - 6- Environment analysis
 - 7- Passing on information to manufacturer and suppliers
- C. Information dissemination
 - 1- Issue the information about customer satisfaction
 - 2- Held a meeting with managers to investigate weaknesses and strengths of competitive position in the market
 - 3- Implement a system for recommendations in order to improve the sale process
- D. Design of responses
 - 1- The price should be equal to the customer perception of the product value
 - 2- Reacting against the competitor price change
 - 3- Implement quality assurance system
 - 4- Integration between strategies and goals of SCM members

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¹ SCM (Supply Chain Management)

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