Conference papers   School of Marketing and Entrepreneurship

2012

Implementation Challenges: Triggers for Interactions in Marketing Strategy Making

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

The old and familiar tools of marketing strategy-making (MSM), which breed sameness and repetition, no longer apply in today's dynamic market environment. Despite the need for new insights, we understand little of how MSM actually occurs in practice. Departing from the common focus- on the prescriptive tools and techniques of strategy– we apply a marketing-as-practice (M-as-P) lens to our exploration of how organisations engage in strategy making. We utilise an in-depth case study to explore problemistic search behaviour and individuals interactions in developing strategic marketing campaigns and uncover specific consultative and collaborative interactional practices.

1. Introduction

Marketing as a discipline, is changing dramatically and the boundaries of marketing are broadening. Marketing is no longer confined to a department or function (Moorman and Rust, 1999, Workman et al., 1998), but is now viewed as a complex management activity that crosses internal and external organisational boundaries (Webster, 2009). This raises the question of whether current theories of marketing still fit in a world of rapid change (Wind, 2009). Attention has moved from the rigid dimensions of the formal process, and the strategic marketing *actions, activities* and *behaviours* which permeate the entire organisation, now represent the central feature of contemporary marketing (Homburg and Pflesser, 2000). This increased emphasis on strategic marketing activities brings with it a greater need to understand how organisations engage in marketing strategy-making (MSM). Marketing strategy is defined as the integrated pattern of decisions that specify the crucial choices concerning marketing activities, which enable the organisation to achieve specific objectives (Varadarajan, 2010), yet we understand little of how MSM actually occurs in practice. This is a worrying concern particularly in an era of economic recession and recovery, when firms are attempting to reinvent their marketing strategy for a radically changed market environment (Piercy et al., 2010). Marketing activities are depicted in the literature as being rooted in organisational capabilities (Day, 1994), implemented within customer value creating processes (Srivastava et al., 2001) and embedded in networks (Neonen and Storbacka, 2010), suggesting a complex MSM environment. Furthermore,

the specific interactional marketing practices within this complex environment are not well specified and under researched (Skalen and Hackley, 2011). If we are to explain the how in strategy making, more in-depth research is needed which explores closely what marketers actually do. This study responds by examining the activities, behaviours and actions of individuals in this dynamic marketing context, which will help identify the underlying mechanisms of how organisations engage in MSM.

Addressing calls to 'rethink' marketing theory and research agenda to make it more relevant to contemporary marketing practice (Palmer and Wilson, 2009, Wind, 2009, McCole, 2004, Reed et al., 2004, Reibstein et al., 2009), our case study combines strategy-as-practice (S-as-P) and marketing-as-practice (M-as-P) perspectives to explore deep into the case organisation, to engage with management's detailed strategy activity, offering the potential for a deeper level of explanation of how marketing strategies are made within firms (Rasche and Chia, 2009, Johnson et al., 2003) by capturing the underlying mechanisms of MSM. In order to understand marketing problems and management practices involved in strategy making (Webster, 2009) we take the non-routine problems encountered in MSM and the interactional practices of middle managers as the units of analysis, to achieve a more fine-grained picture of how those involved in strategy making interact in their search for solutions to those marketing problems and unpack the role of wider functional, social and professional interactions and practices of managers during MSM.

First we look to existing literature on strategy making to demonstrate the need to understand the underlying mechanisms of how MSM occurs within organisations. We then present our case study design for this exploratory study followed by our detailed findings and our proposed framework of MSM, identifying specific consultative and collaborative interactional practices in MSM (see figure 1 in appendix). We go on to discuss the implications of our findings for theory and management practice and suggest avenues for further research in this area.

2. Theoretical background

Every business, whether an established firm or a entrepreneurial start up, must have a strategy, that is an integrated overarching concept of how the business will achieve its objectives (Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2005). Not surprisingly therefore, strategy-making has been at the heart of management research for more than three decades and is concerned with how effective

strategies are shaped within the firm (Slater et al., 2006, Noda and Bower, 1996, Chakravarthy and Doz, 1992, Hart, 1992, Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Despite such scholarly attention our knowledge on the subject remains inadequate. Existing literature argues that strategy formation processes range from informal and emergent to formal and deliberate (Slater et al., 2006, Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), yet the actual activities, actions and interactions in strategy making are not well specified, leaving unanswered the question, how are strategies are actually made within firms? There is a need to fill this gap in knowledge with better theory of strategy *in the making*. The surprisingly limited strategic management literature available focuses on the tools and techniques of strategy making applied in a formal strategic decision making process (Papadakis et al., 1998, Noda and Bower, 1996), resulting in 'narrow, piecemeal conceptions of strategy' (Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2005: 51) despite the reality of business, which presents problems that require insights from diverse disciplines to develop solutions (Drucker, 1994). Our study aims to combine insights from strategic management and marketing to gain a better understanding of how organisations respond to a continuously evolving market environment (Ketchen Jr and Hult, 2011, Varadarajan, 2010, Wind, 2009) by exploring specifically *how* they engage in MSM.

Dominant marketing theories such as the service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), value co-creation (Gronroos, 2011) or the emerging theory of the boundary-spanning marketing organisation (Hult, 2011) indicate a shift away from traditional 'text-book' approaches to marketing. These theories imply that the success of organisations crucially depends on how well marketing activities, processes, and networks are 'molded together' to form an integrated whole (Hult, 2011). Piercy's (2002) seminal work on market-led strategic change, describes how we have now reached an era of 'new' marketing requiring capabilities which allow firm's to manage a complex set of interacting relationships to achieve total integration across functions. Like much existing marketing literature, Piercy's work highlights the interactive and complex nature of strategy making, yet does not explain how organisations actually go about this.

The literature reflects some prescriptive approaches to how organizations *should* approach their strategy making, for example, a reoccurring theme in recent marketing literature is the significance of interaction in strategy making (Johanson and Vahlne, 2011). Applying a business network perspective to marketing strategy, Johanson and Vahlne argue that the strategy

development process requires efforts by many individuals and is an outcome of action, often joint action between network partners (Johanson and Vahlne, 2011: 489). Similarly, Varadarajan (2010: 119) defines marketing strategy as an organisations 'integrated pattern of decisions' concerned with the behaviour of organisations in the marketplace, in their interactions with consumers, competitors and other stakeholders, in the creation, communication and delivery of value to customers.

However, beyond these emerging conceptual insights into how marketing strategy making *should* be approached, we have limited knowledge of how such a complex and interactive process actually unfolds within organisations. We adopt an exploratory case study approach to address this gap in our understanding of MSM. Addressing MSM as a continuous cross-functional, interactive and co-creative process concerned with strategic marketing decisions, actions, activities and behaviours (Morgan, 2012, Gronroos, 2011, Hult, 2011, Johanson and Vahlne, 2011, Varadarajan, 2010, Piercy, 2002), this paper unpacks the complexities and explores specifically the marketing activities and individual interactions within firms, to better understand the process of how marketing strategies are made.

3. Methodology

3.1 Practice-oriented approach- We aim to address the theoretical gap outlined in the previous section, by exploring the practices of marketing strategy *in the making,* through a case study analysis of a large retail organisation undergoing major strategic change. An in-depth qualitative inquiry into how strategy making occurs through practices and interactions is appropriate to our theory-building objective (Pratt, 2009). There are different ways to engage with the notion of practice in research depending on the locus of the researchers attention and the logic of their inquiry (Orlikowski, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, we study practice as a phenomenon, exploring the practical activity and experiences of those involved in MSM. The main assumption made is that to understand what practitioners do in practice will better explain the how of MSM.

A growth in practice-oriented marketing and consumer research is noted within the literature in response to the relative lack of empirical research into how marketing is actually done in organisations (Skalen and Hackley, 2011) . These studies draw on the strategy-as-practice (S-as-

P) concept in strategic management studies, which emphasise the 'doings' of strategy as a central lens through which to understand organisations (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009, Whittington, 2006). However marketing-as-practice (M-as-P) studies have focused mainly on brand building practices at the corporate level (Jarventie-Thesleff et al., 2011) or value creating brand community practices at the consumer level (Schau et al., 2009). While these are important and interesting studies which deepen our understanding of certain marketing practices, they do not specifically address the MSM practices which occur through continuous interactions in organisations. The little fine grained empirical research into the dynamics through which different level actors are involved in the 'doing' of strategy (Wooldridge et al., 2008) at multiple social levels (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007) leads to a lack of cumulative knowledge for investigating the process of 'how' in strategy making (Hart, 1992). Marketing in particular, is an applied business discipline in which engagement with practitioners is highly valued (Reibstein et al., 2009) yet research which examines the actions of individuals engaged in MSM is lacking.

Given its aptness in studying interactions among individuals in the 'doing of strategy' (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009), this paper combines S-as-P with a M-as-P to explore the interactional practices middle managers engage in when creating, developing and implementing marketing strategy, offering the potential for a deeper level of explanation of how marketing strategies are made within firms. We explore specifically middle management practices because of their position at the nexus of strategy formulation and implementation, where it is assumed the majority of actions, interactions and negotiations in MSM will take place (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009).

3.2 Problemistic search perspective- In a world of rapid change and an evolving market environment, business presents complex dynamic situations and problems that require insights from different functions across the organisation. To understand how organisations engage in MSM, we must understand the interactional practices of managers in perceiving, understanding and responding to these complex situations in order to address critical business problems (Webster, 2009, Wind, 2009, Drucker, 2003). Therefore, this paper focuses on exploring middle management interactional practices specifically in non-routine problem solving, which is seen as a critical activity for developing, renewing and improving the knowledge and capability base of organisations (Lampel et al., 2009, Nelson and Winter, 1982). Assuming that the non-routine

problems encountered in MSM require a broader solution search across the organisational network, these will require greater levels of interaction and solution finding activity than do everyday problems that arise (Wennberg and Holmquist, 2008).

3.3 Research design and setting- Our setting is a single organisation that we use to study multiple embedded cases of non-routine problem situations when developing and implementing marketing strategy. We distinguish between everyday problems and strategic non-routine problems, with the latter being the focus of our study. We chose to analyse strategic problem solving within the clearly defined boundaries of several recent marketing campaign efforts to operationalise the overall marketing strategy of the firm. Building on recent studies which have successfully adopted single strategic initiatives to study strategic decision making (Klingebiel and De Meyer, 2012, Kaplan, 2008), this study adopts the multiple strategic marketing campaigns as a context for studying the interactional practices of strategy making. Adopting a single qualitative case study design is particularly suited for developing a holistic, in-depth understanding of a complex, unique, and exploratory phenomena in a real-life context (Yin, 2009, Eisenhardt, 1989). Case study design aligns with our research objective of understanding the elusive 'how' in MSM, because a case study can provide a contextualised explanation for why and how events are produced (Yin, 2009). Our design embeds two units of analysis to try and uncover the underlying mechanisms of MSM (1) the non-routine problem situations at the organisational level and (2) the interactional practices of middle managers, at the individual micro level. Exploring the problem solving interactions at both the organisational and micro level enabled the researchers to capture in-depth, multi-level perspectives and insights into the actual practice of MSM. Theoretical sampling was used to select a large grocery retail franchise organisation undergoing a radical shift in its strategic market positioning as the research site for this study, reflecting the phenomena under investigation.

Company X* is a large Irish retail franchise organisation pursuing an innovative retail business model in which they work in partnership with entrepreneurial retailers in Ireland, UK and Spain with the aim of creating and developing strong retail brands. The focus of this study is on Company X's largest retailer brand and the third largest retailer in Ireland, Brand Y*. Brand Y is the largest retail advertiser in Ireland (€21.3m on press and TV in 2009) with average sales per store reaching €11 million. Responding to unprecedented challenges in the market, Company X

have launched a transformation program across its 193 Brand Y retail stores nationwide in 2011, initiating a complete change in its promotional positioning and marketing strategy. Shifting from its traditional focus areas of fresh food, service and local community towards reducing costs and lowering prices, represents a major change event within which the researchers could delve into the reality of how individuals interact in MSM. Therefore, while single case studies have their limitations, the extreme context in which this study was conducted (Siggelkow, 2007) provided for real insight into how organisations engage in MSM in the face of a rapidly changing competitive landscape, giving our findings broader relevance.

3.4 Data collection- Data was collected through semi structured interviews with multiple respondents. Our main interviewee selection criteria were middle managers involved in the strategic marketing campaigns either in formulation, implementation or throughout, and had direct exposure to the problem situations encountered within those campaigns. We sought to obtain a variety of perspectives by interviewing staff from both marketing and sales functions, enabling us to track MSM from the perspective of those at the nexus of marketing strategy formulation and implementation and providing the potential for a wide scope of possible themes for analysis. Ten in-depth interviews in total were conducted. Four respondents held marketing middle management roles and four held sales middle management roles. The final two respondents held top management roles, in order to triangulate middle management perspectives with top management perspectives of MSM and attain an accurate depiction of this process (see Table 1 in appendix for further respondent information). Interviewing people from different functions and hierarchies helped to limit the risks of perception bias, retrospective sensemaking and impression management (Gibbert et al., 2008). All interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes approximately. Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of each respondent and transcribed verbatim.

An interview guide was used throughout interviewing which included broad open-ended questions which focused on general aspects of MSM; key contributors, influencing variables, and actions and decisions taken. The content of the interview guide evolved iteratively as the responses of initial interviewees allowed us to sharpen our focus on subsequent interviews (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Questions were asked about specific operationalisation campaigns of the marketing strategy, recent or ongoing, within the company. In addition to

semi-structured interviewing, archival documents were used as a secondary data source. Documents analysed were supplied by respondents and consisted mainly of industry reports, internal strategy documentation and commercial marketing campaign plans. During interviews these documents were used by respondents to facilitate their discussion with the interviewer. We triangulated archival data with interviewee interpretations, thus adding rigor to the research approach (Eisenhardt, 1989). As we collected the interview data, we inductively analysed and constantly compared interpretations of key issues and events as discussed by respondents. As themes emerged from the data, we focused on investigating those themes in more depth in subsequent interviews, facilitating our effort to uncover patterns and inconsistencies across respondents and tentative relationships among these emerging themes.

3.5 Data analysis- Like much qualitative research, our analysis proceeded through a process of inductive and deductive reasoning (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, Van de Ven, 2007). We began our analysis by using open coding to identify specific problem situations and challenges encountered in their MSM. We did this by first identifying sets of salient first order concepts based on informant narratives. We searched for relationships and patterns among these concepts and grouped them into second-order categories depicting the specific characteristics of these problems and challenges experienced by informants. These were grouped into two aggregate constructs of problem situation types encountered in MSM (see Table 2 in appendix).

Our review of the literature led us to expect that MSM would involve some form of cross-functional/intra-group interactions (Smith, 2011, Varadarajan, 2010, Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Krohmer et al., 2002, Menon et al., 1999, Papadakis et al., 1998, Mintzberg, 1987). Therefore, having identified specific problem situations encountered in MSM, we undertook a second round of coding focusing specifically on identifying the interactions and response activity of individuals to these problem situations. This second wave of coding followed a similar approach to the first. Based on informant narratives, we used open coding to identify specific activities and interactions of individuals within each of the two problem situation types. We then searched for patterns of and interactions, and finally we grouped these into two aggregate constructs of interactional practices in MSM (see Table 3 in appendix). We followed an iterative process to relate our data and findings to extant literature (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). . Recursive cycling between inductive coding of the data and deductive reasoning through searching existing

literature (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), helped us better explain the emerging themes from our data.

4. Findings

In this section, we conceptualise the interactional practices that emerged in our analysis and summarise our findings in a framework of MSM, proposing that specific implementation challenges act as triggers for interaction in MSM. We identify and unravel two critical types of interactions; consultation practices and collaboration practices and posit that these types of interaction collectively form a continuous interactive feedback loop, through which constant refinements are made to marketing strategy.   We discuss each of the underlying mechanisms presented in our framework of MSM, in more detail. Using illustrative quotes from the data, we explain how implementation challenges triggered specific interactions in MSM which span the organisations internal and external boundaries. We discuss these specific consultative and collaborative interactional practices identified by respondents as critical in finding solutions to implementation challenges. Exploring these interactions between those directly responsible for marketing strategy formation (top management and the marketing function) and those responsible for implementing strategy (deemed as being outside the traditional strategy making boundary, e.g. sales managers and customers) provides us with a greater understanding of how MSM actually occurs in organisations. Overall, our findings indicate that consultation and collaborative practices play a critical role in forming an iterative MSM process from the beginnings of overall strategy formation, to tackling implementation challenges, which in turn trigger interactional practices which then results in constant refinement of marketing strategy.

4.1 Implementation challenges in MSM

4.1.1 Functional and hierarchical management disengagement in MSM – One of the critical problems identified in Company X's MSM was the misalignment of top and middle management in strategy making particularly in their timeframe of action regarding the creation, development and implementation of marketing campaigns. Top management follows a formulaic process of overall strategy formation when deciding the *'big plan objectives'* [EM] for the year. Devising this annual strategy typically takes about four months, *'It's a bit of a convoluted process, but*

quite a methodical eight-step process that we use to get from the beginnings of strategy all the way through to the end which is the plans that the guys execute' [DOM].

A clear distinction is made between the early stages of strategy formation, in which a top management team develop an '*ambition for the brand*' [DOM] for the year ahead, and the subsequent implementation of the specific marketing plans and campaigns which aim to deliver to those strategic goals. However several respondents spoke of their dissatisfaction with the '*disconnect'* or '*span between layers'* between those who devise the initial '*vision'* [MW] for strategy and those who are then left to implement the marketing campaigns stemming from that strategy, '*initially the strategy is formulated at arm's length, and it can be done from too much arm's length...but the barriers are felt down here where there is more engagement, more interaction to close that gap'.* [JM]

A metaphorical space and time distance between actors involved in strategy making is noted above, with the respondent referring to top management strategy formulation practices as strategy making '*at arm's length'*. Middle managers felt that certain issues or barriers which top management is unable to identify or anticipate are inevitably going to arise further down the line when implementation of the strategic marketing campaigns commences. It was felt by respondents that marketing strategy implementation issues should be considered earlier on in the process of strategy formation instead of waiting until the strategy comes down and is met with barriers to implementation.

Once formulated, the annual strategy is deconstructed into and individual marketing campaigns through quarterly action planning, '*because it's retail things can change like that, so typically we look at each quarter and the way we try to organise each quarter activity is through a theme, a quarterly theme'* [EV]. However the marketing department have, in the past, devised these quarterly plans and themes and '*run with it'* [EJ] without consulting at any stage with other functions or externally with their customers, the retailers. The major problem occurs when these quarterly action plans come down from higher levels and those that are responsible for implementing them, the sales managers, are not satisfied with the result. One respondent argues that a major problem for the company is the disengagement between the development of the strategic vision of the firm and the operationalisation of that vision, '*the strategy, it's just a*

vision, it's not getting down to the nuts and bolts of how will it handle, how will it be implemented and the impact…the "how we get there" element can be a huge problem' [MW].

However because of their frontline position within the company, and their close relationships with the retailers, the regional sales managers in Company X are constantly listening, hearing and re-acting to real-time market and customer information, more frequently and at a faster pace than top management formulate strategy. By the time top management go through their four month formulation process and then the marketing department break that strategy down into quarterly activity, the resulting marketing campaigns are often not effectively aligned to deal with what is actually going on in the marketplace. One respondent explains that because issues arise on a constant basis in the fast paced retail environment, they feel that top management don't understand or account for these problems that reoccur frequently out in stores, *'retailers tend to live in real time, when you're dealing with your retailers it's all urgency its firefighting…in twenty odd weeks time the demand is gone…it's lost and it's something else, you know?'* [MW].

4.1.2 Disconnect between customer and company in MSM- Company X has built its unique business model on a retail partnership concept, focused on developing and maintaining long term relationships with its customers, the retailers. The company's mantra '*think like a consumer, act like a retailer'* reveals the high-level thinking of the company in terms of strategy making; they believe that the retailers are their *'bread and butter'* and a '*huge source of input'* [EM] into strategy.   Sales managers talked about how through their distinct middle man position, they are a key touch point for all of the network relationships. One marketing manager commented on the importance of keeping on top of all areas of the business in order to be able to meet the needs and demands of customers, '*the regional managers have to be jack of all trades because they can have a retailer challenge you on margin, challenging you on marketing communications, challenging you on store environment issues…they are the key point of contact'* [EM].

Despite the fact that the case company's' business model is structured around a close partnership with their retailers, and that top management acknowledge the importance of retailer knowledge, expertise and insight, a major issue identified by middle managers was a lack of a customer involvement when devising marketing strategy. A sense of frustration is evident among middle management, particularly sales managers, because they feel that top management does not see

things from a customer perspective when they are formulating strategy, ' *all us guys on the sales team have been there, we've managed stores, we've done all that, but back further up the chain in here, they haven't…so when they're thinking up this stuff and implementing it and looking at the different ways of doing things, they don't always see it from the retailers' point of view'* [JM].

Sales managers act as a funnel, filtering information, issues and concerns between top management and the retailers. It is their responsibility to go out and engage and interact with retailers on a daily basis and then to bring back their knowledge and expertise and challenges from the field and try to get it incorporated into the company's MSM by top management. It is also their responsibility to go out and deliver the company strategy content and rationale to the retailers to get their buy-in. It is because of these dual boundary spanning activities, that sales manager's interactions across the organisation are critical in addressing problem situations because they are in a unique position to *'understand issues and challenges from all sides'* [DOM]

However, a major point of concern among sales managers was that when they encountered problems and then tried to bring back information from the front line of the business which could possibly inform and shape MSM, this information and insight was not exploited. One respondent reveals the challenge in trying to incorporate customer input into strategy *'our retailers are so innovative themselves, but it's almost as if there is no real way of bringing that back and if we do there will be somebody in management saying well what will we do with this, and it, well it just dilutes it completely'* [BT]

4.2 Interactional practices in MSM

Having discussed with evidence from the data, the problem situations encountered in Company X's MSM, further analysis of the data focused specifically on the actual activities and practices engaged in by respondents, in responding to these problem situations in their MSM. A key finding of this paper is the identification of a pattern in middle management problem solving behaviour in MSM. We find that that implementation challenges specifically, act as trigger several interactional practices in MSM and we highlight how middle management are engaged in

a continuous process of consultative and collaborative interactions across the firm's internal and external boundaries.

4.2.1 Consultation practices

Strategy visualisation 'mock up's'- The problem of disconnect between top and middle management triggered Company X to develop and engage in greater levels of consultative interaction. This disconnect resulted in a lack of bottom up input into the development of marketing campaigns. These campaigns are typically formulated in isolation by the marketing department and top management and then sent down to sales managers to implement. One respondent reveals that *'initially, the strategy is formulated up here, and yeah that's great but the barriers are felt down here, where there is more engagement, more interaction'* [TM]. Company X realised that an effective way to address this particular problem was to engage in practices focused on visualising the strategy and translating the plan on paper into a real life tangible product which those responsible for its implementation, could actually visualise and work with. This was achieved through strategy mock-up sessions. Company X would 'dress-up' a particular store according to the full guidelines of the proposed marketing campaign, prior to its launch, *'we actually walked them through the store which was already all set up so they could see it* [the campaign] *in action'* [DOM], enabling marketing managers to consult with their sales colleagues on how the marketing strategy should be approached, how it should look in-store, and what message it should be delivering. .This type of interaction was critical for bridging the disconnect between top management *'strategists'* who are mainly concerned with developing the strategic *'vision'*, and those middle managers at '*other side of the house'* whom are preoccupied with the *'how do we get there'* element and the *'nuts and bolts'* of implementation of these initiatives. The latter of these feel that more bottom-up input into strategy is needed in terms of *'the look and feel of it, how it sells, how customers view it and how the retailers view it and how they approach it'* [TM]. The strategy visualisation and mock-ups sessions within stores of the strategy, was an effective response to this particular challenge in MSM.

The strategy visualisation mock-up's required an integrated effort by various different functions and included full outdoor and indoor marketing communication signage, POS materials, specific display units, etc. All of the regional sales managers were brought together and were taken through the store layout of the marketing campaign plan to get their take on it and any issues

they had with it. This activity fostered high levels of consultation between both top and middle management levels, marketing and sales functions and between the company and retailers and enabled any problems or issues across all of these network boundaries to be *'ironed out'*, which greatly improved *'buy-in'* [EJ] and support for that particular campaign. This activity was a critical mechanism through which the marketing department could consult with both sales managers and retailers to attain their direct feedback and input into how the planned marketing campaign should be implemented, and was a vital step in solving the implementation challenge caused by disconnect between top and middle management in the MSM process.

Consulting with the sales manager was a critical activity in getting the retailers buy-in of the campaign. The rationale behind this action was not just to get sales managers approval but to actually engage with them and facilitate them in raising concerns they have about potential implementation challenges, *'they know the questions they're going to get from the retailer so by getting those questions in first we are able to iron out the things they can see as being issues.'* [CM]. Consulting with sales managers facilitated in getting issues with the strategy content or roll out to be raised and dealt with immediately, thus providing a solution to the problematic issue of disconnect between top and middle management layers in strategy making, *'this time we were asked to have an input, we had an input, we were listened to, we thrashed it, beat it up a little bit even.'* [EJ]

The strategy visualisation mock up activity was a critical departure from past efforts where sales managers were *'sent down'* the marketing campaign plan document and were merely asked to *'tweak'* it [EJ]. The strategy mock up and walk through provided a platform for real-time, direct consultation between those who form strategy and those who implement strategy, providing a critical feedback loop for effective strategy making. This consultative interaction gave middle managers a real sense of being involved; *when you can say look that won't work, should be done this way, that could be improved or whatever it is, we actually felt involved… you inevitably feel that you are part of the solution'* [MW]. One respondent reveals how this specific consultation practice was useful for bridging the gap between top down and bottom up strategy making; *'more bridging between us meant they* [sales middle managers] *were more prepared…and they were able to transfer that preparation onto the stores'* [BT]. Greater consultation between top and middle management on strategic marketing campaigns enabled sales managers to pre-empt

problems from a retailer perspective. Rather than waiting until the strategy *'comes down'* and having to just *'live with it'* [TM] they could actively give their recommendations on the plan and point out where they see challenges, *'we'll say look these are our problems, these are the areas that we need to solve issues in and get better in... and hopefully what will come out of that is a clearer path* [TM]. The visualisation mock up's of marketing strategy campaigns enabled Company X to preempt certain implementation challenges that might present themselves later on, sparking greater consultation between various groups to amend or alter the campaign in certain ways thus eliminating as much as possible those identified challenges.

Formal network meeting structures- One major implementation challenge identified was buy in of marketing strategy by the retailers. The strategy and subsequent marketing campaigns were just presented to them with little consultation with or input from the retailers into this strategy which they would have to implement in their stores. In an attempt to solve this problem, Company X realised that efforts to collaborate more directly with their customers on strategy making were necessary, *'w*e *have to listen, really hear them* [retailers] *because they are closer to the consumer than we are, they are talking to them every day.'* [EM]

In order to achieve greater levels of interaction with their customers in terms of in strategy making, Company X set up of a *'Council of Retailers'*, a representative panel of their 193 retail customers, which the company would formally meet on a regular basis to discuss, challenge and consult with each other on marketing strategy. Encouraging their customers to independently select a representative panel which the company could engage with, facilitated a *'proportional representational'* [DOM] way of consulting efficiently with their businesses customers in strategy making. Rather than the company trying to interact with all 193 store owners, the company to used this formal meeting structure to consult directly with a representative panel of their customers on making important strategic decisions and to discuss openly the development of forthcoming marketing campaigns. One respondent explains *'they are the key forums for challenging us back as a business and for us to challenge them back on say our standards, implementation issues, but also on strategy.'* [MW]

Consultation practices such as those outlined, raised important issues and challenges to getting the proposed marketing campaigns adopted and implemented within stores. However, simply raising issues of concern was not in itself enough to address and solve implementation challenges

encountered in MSM. While these problems did trigger greater consultation between management in different functions and hierarchies, they also triggered greater consultation practices among management to find a solution to these implementation challenges. One respondent made the argument that *'if you are going to bring up a problem, then you have to bring a solution to the table as well'* [EJ].

4.2.2 Collaboration practices

Marketing management realised that while consulting with sales management was critically important because it resulted in many issues and challenges being raised about the planned marketing campaigns, particularly barriers to implementation, it became clear that greater cross-functional collaboration was needed much earlier in the process of MSM. Consulting with those outside of the marketing department through strategy visualisation mock up techniques, formal network meeting structures and representative customer panels, enabled the identification of '*blockages further down the road*' [DOM]. However, it became apparent that greater collaboration on actually developing ideas and devising marketing strategy would help to pre-empt any challenges occurring later in the implementation of strategy. One sales manager illustrates this point effectively*, 'we do need to be brought in more to make sure that what we are doing fits and is right and that it's going to do the job that we want it to do'* [JM]. As a result, the case company began to engage in several collaborative strategy making practices. Triggered by the implementation challenges raised through consultative interactional practices, several open and cross-functional discussion forums were developed, to try and develop greater collaboration in the making of marketing strategy. These forums facilitated the '*joined up thinking*' [CM] which was missing from their previous MSM efforts. We now discuss these collaborative strategy making practices in detail.

Cross functional strategy forums - Prior to the complete development and national launch of a marketing campaign, all of the various groups meet to discuss and debate the marketing information and consumer insight gathered. An internal cross-functional forum where managers from all different functions within the organisation meet on a regular basis to develop strategy and discuss *'whether things aren't' working, whether to get rid of stuff, change some other stuff etc.'*. This formal meeting structure enables input into the formation of strategy from many across the internal boundaries so that a cohesive and shared plan of action can be developed,

providing a collaborative pathway for the company to follow, *'we're all joined up, so trading marketing, sales all work together so we don't go off on tangents or balls get dropped etc.'* [EV].

These structured cross functional forums are acknowledged as playing a major role in facilitating internal engagement and collaboration between top and middle management in marketing strategy making, by focused on delivering a single value message to consumers, *'we all come together to understand and combine all that insight and develop a hook for consumers'* [EM]. While respondents realise that such forums cannot completely prevent challenges or problems in MSM, they do however provide to interactive platform to develop an effective solution. One respondent reveals the dynamics of collaboration within these forums, *'you've outlined the challenges, and they've got challenges too but at least they know where you're coming from…they might not agree completely, but then that will be thrashed out in the forum'* [DOM].

4.3 Continuous interactive feedback loop

Collectively these consultation and collaboration practices form a continuous interactive feedback loop in MSM. The continuous and iterative nature of these interactional practices is highlighted in the data, *'*[it] *is ongoing, it doesn't happen, stop then happen and stop, its constant'* [BT]. However, in addition to the formal information gathering and discussion which takes place through consultation and collaboration practices, we find that MSM is also facilitated through informal information gathering, *'we like to see everything that's happening in the market place and try to respond… well that's the theory, but sometimes it's a case of a retailer saying something to you, making a comment, and you have to deal with it.'* [TM]. Both formal and informal consultation and collaboration practices result in a type of *'trial-and-error'* MSM in which the company is constantly looking for input, insight, feedback from across the whole business network. One respondent clearly illustrates how constant consultation and collaboration practices, across internal and external boundaries, facilitates a continuous cross-functional interactive process of MSM, *'here's the information, here's what we're learning, here's what's coming to us in terms of what's working what's not working, so we must be constantly asking what do you need to do make this work? So it's hugely cross-functional.'* [OL]

We find that continuous interaction, consultation and collaboration results in MSM as an iterative process of continuous feedback and strategy refinement. One respondent reveals how

the constant interactional practices, perhaps distract the company from engaging in radical innovation in their long term strategy and instead places the emphasis on constantly developing, refining and achieving the objectives set for each quarter by the marketing strategy, *'we keep congratulating ourselves for getting things right each quarter, like, that was a good quarterly strategy, that was a good plan for quarter one, that worked well for quarter two…our long term strategy is made up of lots of short term strategies'* [EJ].

5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss three main contributions of this paper to strategy making literature. Firstly, we extend existing marketing strategy literature which acknowledges the difficulties in marketing strategy implementation, yet does not specifically address how companies respond to such implementation challenges in their strategy making. Adopting a problemistic search perspective, we identify that the problem situations encountered in MSM are predominantly implementation challenges, particularly problems of disconnect and disengagement across internal and external boundaries in the development and implementation of strategic marketing campaigns. In addition, we highlight how these implementation challenges act as a trigger for interaction between different functional and hierarchical management levels. Secondly, we unravel the specific nature of these interactional practices, identifying specific consultation and collaboration practices in MSM. And finally, we provide a holistic understanding of the strategy making process by identifying that interactional practices act as a mechanism for strategy refinement by facilitating an iterative feedback loop through which strategy is constantly and continuously refined. We now discuss our contribution in more detail and in light of existing theory and research studies in this area.

5.1 MSM: an iterative process of interaction, feedback and refinement

Marketing strategy implementation is a topic of great interest to both managers and strategy researchers (Noble and Mokwa, 1999) and has received much attention in the strategy literature. Recent studies have explored the inherent difficulties associated with marketing strategy implementation. For example, Slater et al., (2010) explore the difficult task of managing both marketing strategy creativity and implementation simultaneously. Smith (2011), endeavors to explain the poorly understood concept of marketing strategy non-implementation, the variance

between intended and realised strategy. Within the management literature, Klingebiel and De Meyer (2012) explore the complex task of adaptive decision making during the implementation of strategic initiatives. While collectively these studies indicate that strategy implementation is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon (Thorpe and Morgan, 2007) they fall short of explaining how organisations actually respond to such complex implementation challenges. Our study makes an important contribution in this context by first confirming that implementation challenges are a predominant cause of problems in MSM. Secondly, we identify that these implementation challenges trigger specific interactional practices across functional and hierarchical management levels and it is these interactions which lead to changes in strategy.

The service dominant perspective in marketing views core competences of organisations not as physical assets but as bundles of skills, intangible processes, tacit and idiosyncratic routines and actions (Day, 1994, Prahalad and Hamel, 1990, Nelson and Winter, 1982). Within this domain, value co-creation is a key concept (Gronroos, 2011) in which value creation is seen as a joint effort between suppliers and customers whereby suppliers provide their customers with resources that can be used by them to facilitate value creation. Interaction is the underpinning characteristic of a service logic and of value co-creation (Gummesson, 2002). Critically, Gronroos (2011: 246) states that to exploit value co-creation opportunities, firms marketing strategies should 'not be restricted to making promises of potential value' but should include 'activities performed by people involved in interactions with customers as part-time marketers that directly and actively influence the customers' value fulfillment'.

Our study explores specifically marketing strategy in the making and shows that an important part of co-creation of value is consultation and collaboration in the making of the marketing strategy which aims to deliver that reciprocal value. Through constant consultation activities with their customers' the retailers, such as in-store trial mock ups of marketing campaigns, barriers to implementation and miscommunication of the value message to end users were identified which otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Another practice in co-creating marketing strategy was the development of a formal representative panel of the company's customers. While the concept of a joint value creation process between firm and *all* of its' customers may be somewhat idealistic, our findings indicate that in practice, a 'proportional representational' way of interacting with customers may be an alternative solution, particularly

in terms of developing marketing strategy. Rather than trying to create strategy through individual interactions with each of its 193 retail customers, which would have been time consuming and perhaps counter-productive, Company X interacts with an independently appointed a representative panel of their customers on a regular basis, to get their input, buy-in and feedback of strategy. We make a contribution to the service logic in marketing which advocates joint production processes and joint value creation processes, by highlighting how companies can engage in a joint interactive MSM process through consultation and collaboration.

Service marketing literature argues that marketing consists in interactions both within and beyond the marketing department (Gronroos, 2011, Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Gummesson, 1991), however from a marketing-as-practice standpoint, 'the precise interactional practices are empirically under-specified' (Skalen and Hackley, 2011: 191). We make a second contribution by highlighting two specific types of interactional practices in MSM; consultation practices and collaboration practices such as strategy visualisation and trial strategy mock ups, cross functional forums and formal network meeting structures. How organisations strategise through communication, discussion and meeting structures is a growing sub-stream of research within the strategy-as-practice domain (Hendry et al., 2010, Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008, Sminia, 2005). In contrast to traditional perspectives of strategy formation as a process of deliberate and decisive choice, these studies show that strategy practice is much more complex, open and flexible than is originally assumed by these textbook approaches. Sminia (2005: 267), for example, finds that intended strategy is rarely debated deliberately or openly, but strategy content is formed and discussed in a more implicit manner through 'layered discussion'. Hendry et al., (2010:37) explore how boards 'do strategy', and identify two complementary strategising practices, procedural strategising and interactive strategising. Procedural strategising comprises of formal administrative activities, planning committees, quarterly reviews etc, and relies on hierarchies and formalised roles, a form of 'strategizing auto-pilot'. On the other hand, interactive strategising which relies on direct, face-to-face interactions between senior management and other organisational actors relies on ongoing social exchanges between top management and other actors across the firm. Our exploratory study makes an important contribution to this body of literature. We posit that consultation and collaboration are specific interactional practices that can perhaps play a key mediating role between 'procedural' and

'interactive' strategising. Our study also reveals that formal meeting structures and open discussion forums enable consultation and collaboration in marketing strategising at many different levels, not just at the board-management interface or between senior management as previous studies have focused on. We identify interactional practices in marketing strategising between top and middle management, between marketing and sales functions and between the company and customer in MSM.

Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) argue that strategy meetings as social practices stabilise or destabilise the flow of strategy activity. Our study shows that other interactional practices such as strategy visualisation mock ups of marketing campaigns, cross functional forums, and formal network meeting structures can provide a necessary platform where problems and solutions in MSM can, not just be expressed, but actually visualised and worked through in real-time between strategists and operationalists. While Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) discuss how senior management strategy meeting practices can either provide stability in existing strategic direction or facilitate change and evolution in strategic direction, our findings indicate a more middle ground perspective, indicating that consultation and collaboration practices in MSM, particularly between middle managers and customers, facilitate continuous incremental refinement to marketing strategy as opposed to either stabilising or destabilising the flow of strategic activity.

An important assumption made in Hult's (2011) seminal article on the boundary spanning marketing organisation (MOR theory) is that the success of the organisation will depend on how well its 'integrative and mutually reinforcing components' of marketing activities, value-creating processes, networks and stakeholders are 'molded together to form an integrated organization', . Rather than placing emphasis on the marketing department itself, a fundamental premise of Marketing organisation (MOR) theory is that marketing activities, and not the marketing department, are the central feature of contemporary marketing and that the development and implementation of these activities requires boundary spanning beyond the marketing department and function. Our findings make an important theoretical contribution in this context by integrating a marketing-as-practice perspective to understand specifically the activities engaged in when making marketing strategy. We find that the 'molding together' of activities, people and processes in MSM occurs through specific consultation and collaboration interactions across

internal management level boundaries, functional boundaries, and external firm-customer boundaries.

6. Managerial implications and future research

Given the intensity of competition between firms in the current market environment, a critical determinant in the success and the survival of firms is the successful implementation of marketing strategies (Thorpe and Morgan, 2007). Therefore it is critically important for management to be aware of how they approach their MSM in order to critically assess whether there is scope for improvement in how they both formulate and implement strategy.

Our study reveals that a major problem impeding MSM, is disconnect and disengagement across the organisation's boundaries, leading to implementation challenges. Management must have the capability to critically assess their strategy making approach and be able to identify the main problem situations which may be impeding their strategy making. Our study reveals that the implementation challenges identified within the case company acted as a trigger for management interaction. In other words, without having identified the specific problem situations, no effort could have been made to rectify those problems. Although implementation research in strategy is growing, further in-depth studies which explore the complex implementation challenges facing firms, and how they respond to such challenges, are needed.

We have identified two types of interactional practices critical in MSM. We now call for greater research emphasis on exploring further and identifying more of these the interactional practices management engage in for strategy making. We emphasise that management facilitate consultative and collaborative activities and interactions, because these interactions allow for continuous refinements to marketing campaigns, thereby aligning strategy with the changing market environment. Our exploratory case study indicates that interaction in strategy making is critical facilitator to strategic change. We suggest the future research look at how interactions directly and/or indirectly influence the strategy renewal process within firms. The need to invest in the development and improvement of collaborative cross-functional capabilities in MSM is clearly highlighted. Through their interactions, management realised that disconnect between management levels and functional group bias was impeding effective strategy making and invested resources into developing cross-functional teams to encourage greater engagement

across organisational boundaries in MSM. It could be argued by some that consultation between functional groups in strategy implementation already exists in many organisations. However by explicitly identifying consultation and collaborative practices in MSM, we generate greater awareness among management of the importance of formally adopting these interactional practices into their MSM and to dedicate sufficient resources to properly facilitate it.

This research should be evaluated in light of its limitations, which point to potential avenues for future research. The goal of this exploratory paper was not to seek generalisability or cause and effect relationships, but to search for understanding of the underlying mechanisms of MSM, and to identify these underlying mechanisms which may themselves have transferability. However, as with any single case study research, further research is needed to establish transferability of our findings to different organisational contexts and industries. We have established MSM as an iterative process of strategy formation, implementation challenges, interactional practices and strategy refinement. However, this iteration process will, more than likely, vary across firms, organisational contexts and industries. We conduct our study within a highly dynamic retail environment in which the case company was attempting to change strategic orientation from a differentiation to low cost marketing strategy. We encourage testing of our preliminary findings in different dynamic research settings with a view to adding and extending its underlying constructs.

7. Conclusion

Organisations are operating in more dynamic markets than ever before. Therefore, a greater understanding of how organisations engage in MSM within such a dynamic context is needed. Departing from the common focus within the literature- on the prescriptive tools and techniques of strategy– we apply a marketing-as-practice (M-as-P) lens to our exploration of MSM. Adopting a problemistic search perspective (Cyert and March, 1963), to explore the interactional practices of middle management in MSM our findings reveal that MSM occurs through a iterative process of interaction, feedback and refinement. We find that MSM involves continuous interaction, across both internal and external organisational boundaries, between deliberate strategy formulation practices, problem identification practices, consultation practices to find solutions to those problems and finally collaborative practices to develop, modify or amend strategy accordingly. We prpose a framework which depicts MSM as an iterative process of

interaction, feedback and refinement (see Fig 1 in appendix) and posit that this framework of interactional practices serves as a useful reference for further theory development in MSM and also provides guidance for marketing management practice.

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Appendix

Table1: Respondent profile

	Respondent	Position	Time in current position (yrs)
1	DOM	Top management, brand strategist	6
2	EM	Top management, own brand label manager	3
3	TM	Middle management, regional sales manager (overseeing 20+ retail stores)	9
4	EJ	Middle management, regional sales manager (overseeing 20+ retail stores)	2
5	MW	Middle management, regional sales manager (overseeing 20+ retail stores)	5
6	JM	Middle management, regional sales manager (overseeing 20+ retail stores)	5
7	EV	Middle manager, marketing manager	3
8	CM	Middle manager, marketing manager	2
9	BT	Middle manager, marketing manager	1
10	OL	Middle manager, marketing manager	4

Table 2: Problems situation types identified in MSM

Informant/first-order concepts	Second-order concepts Defining characteristics of the problem (and frequency of mention by respondents)	Total no of instances	Aggregate constructs
'Strategy making at arm's length' *'Bit of a convoluted process'* *'Span between layers'* *'The strategy comes down and you're expected to live with it'* *'Strategy, well it's just a vision'* *'The how do we get there element can be a problem'* *'Far too often we roll out these campaigns and all these various things but by the time they hit the store they're not right and well, they kind of fall flat on their face'* [OL]	Misalignment in time-frame of action between top and middle management (7) Difficulties in reaching consensus in decision making Issues of physical span between layers in strategy making (3) Challenges in developing cross-functional working (5) Blockages in processes across the network Misalignment between strategic vision and practical implementation (6) Challenges in designing and delivering a single key marketing message (2)	23	Functional and hierarchical disengagement in MSM
'There is that element of empathy with the retailers because sometimes we do things in here that would drive people mad' [TM]. *'There has to be more input into strategy from the other side, from the coal face really and truly'* [EJ]	Gap between head office and the customer (retailers) and end consumers (4) Challenges to getting buy in of strategy from retailers (6) Issues of autonomy of independent retail owners (3) Difficulties changing consumers brand perception (2) Problems in approach to resolving customer issues/problems (3) Issues of gathering, interpreting and utilising consumer insight (4)	22	Company and customer disconnect in MSM

Table 3: Interactional practices identified in MSM

Informant/first-order concepts	Second-order concepts	Aggregate constructs
'you need to be able to say there are going to be issues here, but if you do it this way and do that, then they can be solved' *'this time we were asked to have an input, we were listened to, we thrashed it* [campaign plan] *around, beat it up a little bit'* *'When you're engaged and you're asked your opinion you inevitably feel that you are part of the solution'* *'What we found from this particular campaign is that sales were brought into it more'* *'they could visualise it properly which meant they could sell it in better'*	Visualising the strategy through trial strategy mock up's 'Going the extra mile'- physically going out into stores to walk and talk through the proposed marketing campaign Consultation with those who are able to see and pre-empt any challenges to implementation prior to national launch of a campaign Frontline staff still kept one step removed from actual formulation of marketing campaigns Marketing formulate, and then consult with sales and customers to raise, discuss and overcome an y implementation challenges	Consultation practices in MSM
'the look and feel of it, how it sells, how customers view it, and how the retailers view it and how they approach it, we definitely need to be brought in more on that element of it' *'It's central to get that pre-engagement with key stakeholders'* *'So going into the consumer forum, while you're probably still going to meet objections, you're not catching anybody cold'* *'We would work cross-functionally more now'*	Greater cross-functional working on formulating the strategy and campaigns Open, informal and formal platforms to discuss issues, raise challenges and shape strategy Development of cross functional and consumer forums to meet regularly with and develop and discuss strategy Constant development, amendment and renewal of strategy Continuous open feedback loop into strategy	Collaborative practices in MSM

Figure 1: An Iterative Process of Interaction, Feedback and Refinement in MSM

- Functional and hierarchical disengagement in MSM
- Company and customer disconnect in MSM
- Act as a trigger for interaction

- Strategy visualisation mock-up's
- Formal network meeting structures

Implementation challenges trigger interactional practices

Consultation practices

Strategy refinements through continuous feedback loop

Collaboration practices

- Consultation & collaboration interactional practices form a constant feedback loop in MSM
- Effects the strategic flow of activity
- Continuous refinement of straetgic marketing campaigns

- Cross functional strategy forums
- Formal network meeting structures