

Understanding the Determining Factors of Corporate Commitment to a Co-creation Approach of B-to-B Services

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Abstract:

In this article, we identify the determinants of corporate commitment to co-create business-to-business (B-to-B) services. After a literature review, we conduct a quantitative survey with 175 French service providers. To test research hypotheses, we lead two factorial analyses and a linear regression.

The findings show that it may be possible to characterize firms more willing to involve B-to-B customers in co-creation activities by looking at two categories of factors that are industry-level and firm-level criteria.

Key Words: Co-creation – B to B services – Commitment - Service innovation

Introduction and Objectives

In the first decade of the new millennium, a growing number of companies like FedEx, LEGO, Starbucks or the French Postal Service *La Poste* have started to engage their customers into the design of their product or service offerings. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) called this new form of collaboration “Co-creation”. The goal of the practice is to capture value from the contributors to create offers those suit customers’ needs, thus leading to gain competitive advantages. Thus, “customers emerged as a source of competence“(Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014, p.24).

Despite a high research interest towards co-creation practices, we need further theoretical and managerial developments, and more particularly in the Business-to Business (B-to-B) context. Indeed, according to the co-creation literature, no research seems to have been done on the intention of business leaders to co-create new services with B-to-B customers. Yet, we may wonder why some B-to-B service providers are more willing to co-create services than others?

In this research, we attempt to address this issue. After presenting the theoretical framework, research hypotheses are exposed. Then, we explain the methodology of the quantitative survey. Results are presented followed by a discussion on the main theoretical and managerial implications. We conclude with the limitations and research avenues.

1. Conceptual Framework

According to Ostrom *and al.* (2010), one of the main research priorities in management sciences deals with the improvement of service experience by the co-creation. Indeed, in our developed societies, organizations are concerned with exchange of services (knowledge and skills) in the marketplace. This is the fundamental premise of the Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). SD-logic posits that firms follow a *market with customers'* philosophy with exchanges of value between the firm's networks instead of a *market to customer's* vision where customers do not participate to the service or product design.

Most of the research studies have focused on the co-creation process (i.e Grönroos, 2009), on "co-concepts" like co-production (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003), co-innovation (Le Nagard and Reniou, 2013), or on its potential outcomes (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014) to name but a few.

In spite of a consensus on the positive effects of co-creation in business activities, there is still a lack of empirical researches on the reasons why some companies are more ready to engage their customers in co-creation activities (author, 2013) on the basis of industry or market-related factors. Based on that observation, we propose to raise this issue in our study. The results may provide guidance to managers to take strategic decisions. They could also profile companies more ready to involve B to B customers in a co-creation process.

2. Research Hypotheses

Research hypotheses are based on 1) market-orientated criteria and on 2) industry-orientated criteria. We test these variables on the intention of firms to co-create.

2.1. Market-related hypotheses

According to the literature, two theories explain the differences of firm's performance: Industrial Organization theory and Resource-Based View (RBV).

Industrial organization theory considers companies decisions in terms of positioning in market-driven products (Bain, 1951). Indeed, mobility barriers in those markets may provide an explanation of differences of firms' performance in the same industry. In spite of their specificities, firms' profitability may be affected by market and industry-wide factors.

A market is "concentrated" if a small group of actors share the bulk of the sales. As a result, companies are able to cut costs and to improve product and service quality. On the contrary, in a competitive environment, companies have to improve product quality in order to retain their customers and increase profits. Thus, they need to have resources and competencies to gain sustainable competitive assets. Co-creation seems to be a good solution to achieve these goals as it implies individuals' commitment in the service design process. Further to these developments, we posit the H1:

H1: *There is a positive relationship between competitive intensity and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B to B customers.*

According to Jap (1999), market dynamism refers to the degree of change in the market. It includes a degree of uncertainty that drives companies to innovate. Market dynamism has an influence on corporate strategy. Management decisions need to be adjusted quickly to succeed in the long-run. To remain competitive inside the market, firms need to modify their products or services continuously. As an innovative method, co-creation becomes a way to

cope with the changing customer demand by integrating stakeholders into the service design process. In accordance with these assumptions, we propose hypothesis H2:

H2: *There is a positive relationship between market dynamism and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B to B customers.*

2.2. Industry-related hypotheses

According to Wenerfelt (1984), companies that belong to the same business sector may develop their activities totally differently. In fact, the RBV suggests that firms have to deploy appropriate resources that provide opportunities in order to gain competitive advantage. If resources are properly managed, they enable to secure firms' position in the marketplace. Thus, as for the Resource-Based Theory, the specificities of firms could explain their differences in terms of performance (Hunt, 2000). The allocation of existing resources is the key to add value for customers and to set the company apart from competitors.

In a co-creation context, it is interesting to identify if 1) corporate culture, 2) financial resources, 3) relational capabilities and 4) collaboration management-related factors have effects on the intention to co-create B-to-B services. Then, we propose to examine these factors.

Corporate culture (or organizational culture) is defined by Schein (1985, p.9) as « A pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems”.

The concept of market orientation stems from corporate culture. It is defined by Narver and Slater (1990, p.21) as: “the organization culture (...) that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behaviors for the creation of superior value for buyers and, thus, continuous superior performance for the business”. Market orientation was mainly developed by Kohli and Jaworski (1993) and Narver and Slater (1990). According to these authors, market-oriented companies are more profitable, experience high growth rates, have high success rates of products, and large market shares.

Further to these developments, we may assume that market-oriented companies that seek to collect information and integrate new customers' ideas would be interested by engaging B-to-B customers in co-creation activities. Then, we formulate H3:

H3: *There is a positive relationship between the market orientation of a firm and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B to B customers.*

As the concept of market orientation, culture of innovation is part of corporate culture which is a higher-order concept. A company with a high culture of innovation is more willing to adopt new services and processes and uses innovation procedures. According to Levin *and al.* (1987), companies that tend to innovate could better take advantage of a consortium (knowledge, methods, processes...) than others do. Thus, if organizations with high R&D capacities are used to work with partners, we may suppose that they could be more willing to collaborate in a co-creation context where offerings are created with corporate customers. Indeed, resource integration may play an important role in service innovation.

Based on these arguments, we formulate H4:

H4: *There is a positive relationship between the firm's capacity to innovate and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B-to-B customers.*

In accordance with the Resource-Based View theory, « Successful companies are the ones which have better resources and capabilities which enable them to produce offerings in a effective and/or an efficient way that have a certain value for customers” (Ngobo and Stéphanie, 2001, p.93). On top of that, according to Peteraf (1993), only the inimitable, non substitutable and rare resources provide the companies with a competitive edge. They also become a source of long-term economic growth. Thus, in a co-creation situation where companies collaborate with outside partners, it is then possible to use new working methods or tools from co-creators to design products or services. Moreover, if we refer to the SD-logic, company is a value facilitator (Grönroos, 2009) by allocating several resources (tools, furniture, etc.) to its customers. All of these enable to take advantage of individuals and thus to improve the outcomes of co-creation.

Further to these developments, we hypothesize that companies would be more inclined to innovate and so to co-create if they have available resources (organizational slack¹):

H5: *There is a positive relationship between the firm's organizational slack and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B-to-B customers.*

Dyer and Singh (1998) define relational capabilities as the firm's propensities to collaborate and to govern business relationships. They represent the firm's ability to interact with other partners and to share knowledge with them. Then, the learning process has relevant effects on firms' growth and innovativeness. From the Resource-Based View theory and the Service-Dominant Logic, we suppose that a company with employees, who are familiar with working in a collaborative way and have strong relational capabilities, will tend to be involved and to succeed in a service design process. We posit the hypothesis H6:

H6: *There is a positive relationship between employees' relational capabilities of a firm and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B-to-B customers.*

Communication can be defined as “the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between firms” (Anderson and Narus 1990. p. 44). In accordance with the literature, communication is one of the antecedents of commitment in collaboration relationships characterized by cooperation and trust between business partners (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). On top of that, according to author (2013), communication leads to improve service co-creation between leaders and B to B customers. Then we propose H7:

H7: *There is a positive relationship between communication and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B-to-B customers.*

Collaborative tools are necessary to co-create as shown in many business cases. More particularly, Internet provides easier access to user tool kits for innovation (Thomke and Von Hippel, 2002) that enable to develop faster and less expensive products or services. For example, Apple provides tools for users to give comments and ratings on the App Store, providing then feedbacks to developers to improve applications (Ramaswamy and Ozcan,

¹ “Organizational slack is that cushion of actual or potential resources which allows an organization to adapt successfully to internal pressures for adjustment or to external pressures for change in policy, as well as to initiate changes in strategy with respects to the external environment” (Bourgeois, 1981, p. 30).

2014). Thus, the more a company will commonly use such tools, the more it will introduce them in its collaborative practices. Then, we formulate H8:

H8: *The degree of use of collaborative tools inside a firm has a positive influence on the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with B-to-B customers.*

According to Geyskens and Steenkamp (1995), trusting one's partner brings a feeling of security, reduces uncertainty, and creates a perceived supportive climate. Collaborative relationships lead to all the more positive outcomes if partners are trustworthy (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). If relationships characterized by trust are established between organizations, it will be easier to co-create values with corporate customers. Based on these assumptions, we posit H9 related to the positive relationship between trust and co-creation.

H9: *There is a positive relationship between the degree of trust towards B-to-B customers and the willingness of the leadership to co-create services with them.*

The best method for co-creating value is to focus on the experience of outside contributors. According to Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2014), stakeholders may play a key role by taking part in product or service design. Thus, if companies are used to involve partners in their innovation activities or when they modify existing products or services, they will tend heavily to make individuals participate into new collaborative activities such as co-creation. Based on this discussion, H10 is suggested:

H10: *There is a positive relationship between the willingness of the leadership to engage partners in innovation activities and the will to co-create services with B-to-B customers.*

3. Method

3.1. Measurement scales

English scales were translated and adapted to French. Table 1 presents the scales chosen for our study.

Variables	Scale measures	Description	Number of items
Market-oriented factors			
<i>Competitive intensity</i>	Jaworski and Kohli (1993)	Competitive intensity	5
<i>Market dynamism</i>	Jaworski and Kohli (1993)	Market turbulence and technological turbulence	4
Industry-oriented factors			
<u>Corporate culture</u>			
<i>Market orientation</i>	Narver and Slater (1990) Kohli and Jaworski (1993)	Competitor orientation and customer orientation Interdepartmental connectedness	5
<i>Innovation culture</i>	Hurt et Teigen (1977)	Perceived Organizational Innovativeness Scale (PORGI)	6
<u>Resources and capabilities</u>			
<i>Resources</i>	De Luca and Atuahene-Gima (2007)	Organizational slack	5

	Hocevar (2010)	Resource investments	
<i>Relational capabilities</i>	Hocevar (2010)	Individual collaborative capabilities	5
Collaboration management			
<i>Communication</i>	Morgan and Hunt (1994) Hocevar (2010)	Communication Information sharing	6
<i>Collaborative tools</i>	Hocevar (2010)	Collaborative tools and technologies	3
<i>Trust</i>	Morgan and Hunt (1994) Jap (1999)	Trust	5
<i>Partners' involvement</i>	Hocevar (2010)	Strategical actions for collaboration	4

Table 1: Measurement scales

To measure *Intention to co-create*, we surveyed corporate leaders on the willingness to involve their customers in the service co-creation process. We used a unique item we developed for the study using a five-point Likert scale.

Control variables were also used in the study. To measure *Structural flexibility*, we used Hocevar's scale (2010). *Past collaborations* which refer to the companies' involvement in innovation activities with partners during the three year period of 2011-2013 were also measured. We provided a list of potential collaboration partners from a UK innovation survey² which also enabled us to establish other control variables such as *Innovation types* (significantly improved service, new service, method/process or none) or *Breath of innovation* (incremental, radical and technological innovations).

3.2. Questionnaire Survey

To conduct the quantitative study, we collected data through a web-based questionnaire survey between March and June 2013. 175 completed questionnaires were collected on a sample of 2 000 French service providers (8,75% of response rates). This result is not surprising as regarding the length of the questionnaire, the target of the study (business leaders) and the relatively recent research area that is "co-creation".

Data were analyzed through an exploratory factorial analysis (EFA) with SPSS 21.0 and a confirmatory factorial analysis (CFA) with AMOS 17.0.

As for the EFA method, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed with a Varimax rotation to purify our scales. Then, we used KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) statistic and Bartlett's test of sphericity to keep or eliminate factors. Finally, we assessed the reliability of the remaining items with Cronbach's alpha (results are given in appendix 1).

Regarding the CFA method, we used the Maximum Likelihood method to estimate parameters. To evaluate the goodness-of-fit of the estimated models, we used absolute fit indices (Chi-square, GFI, RMR and RMSEA) and relative fit indices (CFI and NFI) (Roussel *and al.*, 2002). Then, the Jöreskog's rho and the explained variance were used to estimate the convergent validity of the measures (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In the end, we assessed the discriminant validity of the measures with a bivariate correlation matrix through SPSS. The Pearson's coefficient provides the level of correlation between the concepts (high correlations close to -1 and 1).

² Etude réalisée par l'office national de statistiques qui a lieu tous les deux ans en Angleterre sur environ 28 500 entreprises de tous types de secteurs d'activités. Questionnaire disponible sur http://www.detini.gov.uk/ukis_questionnaire_excl_front_page.pdf.

Further to these analyses, a linear regression on Latent GOLD 5.0 was undertaken to measure research hypotheses. Through its latent class functions, Latent GOLD was also used here to profile companies more ready to co-create.

4. Findings

4.1. Model fit

Absolute fit indices (GFI, RMR) and relative fit indices (NFI and CFI) all demonstrate a good model fit for the factors related to market. The chi-square of *Competitive intensity* is good (p-value <0,05) and the RMSEA is significant for *Market dynamism* (<0,05).

Results related to GFI, RMR, NFI and CFI also showed a good model fit for the factors related to industry. Chi-squares are significant for *Communication* (P=0,000) and *Partners involvement* (p=0,000). RMSEA index is significant for *Innovation culture* (0,000), *Relational capabilities* (0,077) and *Trust* (0,000).

For *Structural flexibility*, GFI, RMR, NFI and CFI indices showed a good model-fit in spite of poor RMSEA and chi-square values.

According to the results of the CFA, all items of the following concepts : *Competitive intensity*, *Market dynamism*, *Market orientation*, *Innovation culture*, *Resources (organizational slack)*, *Relational capabilities*, *Communication*, *Trust*, *Collaborative tools*, *Partners involvement* and *Structural flexibility* have significant factorial contributions with values between 0,49 and 0,97. Jöreskog's Rhos are all above 0,70 with values between 0,73 and 0,86 thus supporting the reliability of the model. These results (Cronbach's alphas, Rhôs and variance explained) are given in Appendix 1.

If we refer to the results of the variance explained, all factors have achieved 0,5 score. It is conformed to the usual norms established in the literature meaning that the convergent validity is achieved. In terms of discriminant validity, Pearson's correlation indicate that factors have correlations between -0,190 and 0,744.

4.2. Hypotheses validation

According to the analyses, *Market dynamism* (0,517, p= 8,70 E-05), and *Partners involvement* (0,271, p=0,013) have positive impacts on firm's *Intention to co-create* thus supporting H2 and H10. H4 related to *Innovation culture* (-0,418, p=0,00075) can not be validated because the hypothesis assumes the positive relationship between innovation culture and intention to co-create while the relationship is negative in the results of the regression. However, the relationship is significant. *Diversification* (-0,293, p=0,00017) and *Type of innovation* with no change for the last 3 years (0,299, p=0,0007) have also effects on the variable *Intention to co-create*.

The value of the coefficient of determination R^2 is 53,6%. If we refer to the Chin's criteria (1998), this result is significant. It means that *Intention to co-create* is properly explained by the variables. The final model is presented in Appendix 2.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

The goal of this study was to identify market and industry-related factors which may have an influence on the intention of business leaders to engage in service co-creation.

Most of the antecedents that have an influence on co-creation activities are related to industry-specific factors (partners' involvement, corporate culture, diversification and type of innovation). These findings provide support to MacGahan and Porter (1997) whose study was conducted in an American context and the results of Ngobo and Stéphanie (2001) in a French context. Indeed, these authors show that industry-related factors may be identified as primary determinants of profitability and competitiveness. As a consequence, a firm which has a participative management style is more likely to succeed in implementing a service co-creation approach with their B to B customers. Market criteria have less influence on the corporate decision to co-create B to B services.

From a managerial perspective, our findings reveal that some factors need to be considered by firms before starting a co-creation approach. If we refer to the results of H2, firms that evolve in dynamic markets where supply and demand for services are changing constantly, would better engage in co-creation activities to provide offerings that match better customer requirements. The results of H4 suggest that suppliers less likely to co-create are those with an innovation culture. Indeed, the study points out the fact that firms with a high degree of interest towards co-creation activities have less innovation capabilities. This finding also supports the positive relationship between the innovation adoption (no change for the last three years) and the intention of leadership to co-create B to B services. It clearly reveals that the principal interest to co-create is to improve its innovation capabilities through customer contributions.

If service suppliers are used to collaborate with other organizations, they will be more likely to adapt to co-creation conditions, thus explaining the results for H10. Finally, our findings show that specialized businesses are more likely to co-create than diversified companies. As co-creation implies to take some risks by sharing information with customers, firms that have the total control of their processes and activities will be more ready to co-create.

5.2. Limitations and further research

In the co-creation part of the survey, we used the scenario method. Indeed, service innovation approaches are not yet widely practiced in France and more particularly in small businesses. So this method seemed to be appropriate in a service context. Thus, our results are based on potential behaviors and decision makings that can not be turned out empirically as managers who completed the questionnaire have not all experienced co-creation situations.

On top of that, the goal of the study was to identify the antecedent of firms' intention to co-create B to B services and not to measure performance of co-creation projects. It could be interesting to join the determinants together with the effects on project performance in order to have a complete model of service co-creation in a B to-B context.

In spite of these limitations, we suppose that this study will make some meaningful contributions to the literature on co-creation. Indeed, it shows that it is possible to consider firms more likely to engage in service co-creation on the basis of market- and industry-related factors.

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Appendix1. Results of the factorial analyses

	Factor	Cronbach's Alpha	Jöreskog's Rho	Variance explained	
<u>Market-driven factors</u>	<i>Competitive intensity</i>	0,857	0,80	0,50	
	<i>Market dynamism</i>	0,709	0,80	0,50	
<u>Industry-driven factors</u>	<i>Market orientation</i>	0,758	0,75	0,50	
	<u>Corporate culture</u>	<i>Innovation culture</i>	0,784	0,80	0,50
	<i>Financial resources</i>	0,876	0,73	0,50	
	<u>Resources and capabilities</u>	<i>Relational capabilities</i>	0,809	0,83	0,50
	<u>Collaboration management</u>	<i>Communication</i>	0,834	0,83	0,50
	<i>Collaborative tools</i>	0,834	0,87	0,78	
	<i>Trust</i>	0,773	0,79	0,50	
	<i>Parters' involvement</i>	0,809	0,79	0,50	
	<u>Control variable</u>	<i>Structural flexibility</i>	0,773	0,70	0,82

Appendix2. The final model on the determinants of co-creation in B-to-B services

