INTRAORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE SHARING AMONG KEY ACCOUNT SALESPEOPLE: THE IMPACT ON BUYER SATISFACTION

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By sharing internal and external knowledge, key account salespeople are better equipped to advance a firm's competitive position and to enhance buyer satisfaction. In the fast-paced, complex business-to-business services environment where key account salespeople are close to the customer, yet struggle to replicate an organization's best practices, the antecedents and outcomes of knowledge sharing are of managerial and theoretical value. Extending the current knowledge management literature in marketing, this paper develops a conceptual framework focusing attention on core constructs relating to the individual (identity salience and goal congruence) and to the organization (organizational coupling, internal competitive climate, and informal rewards) that influence and shape active intraorganizational sharing of key account knowledge. A central outcome of this model is the isolation of the positive impact knowledge sharing has on buyers' satisfaction with key account salespeople.

INTRODUCTION

Competitive advantage can be gained by organizations that have a greater ability to both access and integrate internal and external knowledge (Argote and Ingram 2000; Day 2000). Further, most of the knowledge that firms need to compete and to manage accounts effectively is frequently held by employees within the organization (Davenport and Prusak 1998). Salespeople often possess the richest information within the organization and regularly are the first to be aware of changes in the market (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2006), and thus, are a critical information source within the firm (Cross et al. 2001). However, employees within the same organization commonly withhold knowledge from others, selectively share knowledge, and are often unaware of the knowledge they possess that might be useful to others (cf. Desouza 2003; Ramaswami, Srinivasan and Gorton 1997; Ustuner and Godes 2006; Yang 2008).

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Consistent with social exchange theory, information asymmetry is related to salesperson performance, and the asymmetry leads to possible intrafirm advantages for the salesperson (Ramaswami, Srinivasan and Gorton 1997). This increases the incentives for salespeople to hoard information. However, organizations better facilitating knowledge sharing, thus reducing the asymmetry, may be more effective at solving customer problems and improving account performance.

Despite evidence highlighting the importance of intraorganizational knowledge sharing (Bendapudi and Leone 2002) and repeated concerns in business practice of the mechanisms of knowledge transfer in general, the topic has received little theoretical development of knowledge sharing among salespeople and related outcomes. Technological change has driven much of the recent research in knowledge management (cf. Moutot and Bascoul 2008), yet at the same time forecasts suggest that up to 70 percent of CRM projects will fail overall (McKendrick 2000), with additional reports that the majority will not produce a significant return on the investment (Thakur, Summey and Balasubramanian 2006). Recent surveys continuing to point to salespeople as culprits in not embracing knowledge-sharing projects (McGillicuddy 2007). Much of this failure can be attributed to salespeople naturally protecting knowledge that they have, while at the same time unintentionally handicapping the organization from capitalizing on the variety of information these key boundary spanners possess. Chonko, Roberts and Eli (2006:44) suggest that "when aspects of an organization are not aligned with desired behaviors, the desired behaviors are simply not done." Thus we focus on the desired behavior of knowledge sharing and specifically identify organizational and individual drivers of this behavior. The purpose of this research is to develop a conceptual framework that identifies the main factors of intraorganizational knowledge sharing among key account salespeople, which is a group both highly important to the firm and interfacing with crucial customers. The framework offered illustrates the link between the process of knowledge sharing and a buyer's satisfaction with the key account salesperson.

This research contributes to the marketing literature in three significant ways. First, the underlying mechanisms of knowledge sharing among key account salespeople are isolated. Capon (2001, p. xi) states, "key accounts typically comprise those customers that currently do, and in the future will, purchase the majority of the firm's products and services. Key accounts are the firm's single most important asset." Salespeople responsible for key account management are in a position of great responsibility and have a high degree of importance to the firm. Key account salespeople are also likely to have diverse information based on the specialization of customers across industries and geographies that could be used for innovation within the firm (Stewart, Mullarkey and Craig 2003). Yet, because of the key account salesperson's direct relationship managing a few important customer accounts, critical market knowledge may be acquired by the salesperson but not shared internally. The personal selling and sales management literature has determined that salespeople's knowledge and skill at obtaining information positively influences sales performance (Solomon et al. 1985; Weitz, Sujan and Sujan 1986). However, while salespeople's use of knowledge has been addressed in previous research, the primary drivers of knowledge sharing have not been identified. Research has continually suggested that knowledge dissemination within an organization is critical in gaining stronger footholds in the market (cf. McDonald and Madhavaram 2007). Thus, given that effective knowledge transfer is a major asset for firms in building competitive advantage (Lee et al. 2008; Menon and Varadarajan 1992), identifying conditions encouraging knowledge sharing among key account salespeople is valuable to both marketing scholars and practitioners.

Second, this paper enhances the sales management and knowledge management literature to include behavioral and social aspects of knowledge sharing. While knowledge sharing has been identified as critical to firm performance (Kogut and Zander 1996), previous research in this area has focused on the cognitive and economic aspects of the exchange (cf. Postrel 2002). The behavioral and social aspects of knowledge sharing have been relatively unexplored. The salesperson is inherently embedded in a social system, thus a rich understanding of the behavioral and social forces guiding the salesperson's actions is of value.

Third, we expand the general domain of knowledge sharing to include a link to an account relevant outcome for both the salesperson and the firm. The knowledge management literature has been criticized for a nearly exclusive focus on learning dimensions, while ignoring competitive aspects (Grandori and Kogut 2002), as well as giving limited attention to outcomes of knowledge transfer (Huysman and DeWit 2004). By illustrating the connection between the knowledge sharing behavior of the key account salesperson and buyers' satisfaction with the salesperson, we provide meaningful outcome metrics in the conceptualization of the knowledge sharing process. This paper extends the knowledge management and key account management literature to include not only competitive aspects of knowledge sharing, but also social, behavioral, and attitudinal.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT

Tapping into the vast knowledge within organizations continues to be a challenge for managers attempting to successfully improve relations with major customers. Marketing, as a philosophy and as a function, is geared towards problem-solving activities (Glazer 1991). Knowledge transfer or sharing is a critical component of such activity. Okhuysen and Eisenhardt (2002) define knowledge-sharing occurring when "individuals identify and communicate their uniquely held information" (p. 383). Effective dissemination of market information is a key component of a firm's market orientation. The literature illustrating a link between a firm's market orientation (with one component a firm's ability to disseminate market intelligence) and performance (cf. Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Maltz and Kohli 1996; Slater and Narver 1995) has opened the gateway for research on a fundamental source of knowledge, the individual. Lacking in our understanding of knowledge sharing are the joint facilitation roles of the individual and the organization.

While the theoretical backbone of organizational knowledge and learning is entrenched in the literature (cf. Argyris and Schon 1978; Levitt and March 1988; Sinkula 1994; Slater and Narver 1995), many of the treatments focus upon knowledge creation (cf. Madhavan and Grover 1998), knowledge facilitation (cf. Argote and Ingram 2000), or knowledge utilization (cf. Menon and Varadarajan 1992), each of these presupposing the actual sharing of knowledge. Sinkula (1994) suggests focus and precedence be given to research on the supply and distribution of information. This research advances the next step in the development of the knowledge and sales management literature in marketing by addressing issues of why some key account salespeople do not share knowledge, what the organization's role is in facilitating knowledge sharing, and how knowledge sharing relates to account outcomes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The focus of this research is on the sharing of knowledge by key account salespeople. Marketing strategies for key accounts require the effective management of knowledge and information. Key account knowledge is based upon what the salesperson knows about the products and services offered, the customer, the customer's business, competitive and environmental forces and past failures and successes. The knowledge is actionable and based on the experiences of the key account salesperson. Knowledge possessed by the key account salesperson can include changes in the account's competitive environment, fluctuations in the account's sales performance, changes in the buyer's level of satisfaction, trends in the market, approaches to solutions for the account, knowledge of how to respond to the key account under different situations, factors influencing the customer to buy or not to buy, and options for providing more comprehensive service for the account. The sharing of key account knowledge can include informal sharing of information, codification of knowledge, and updating and renewal of information.

In their development of a taxonomy of organizational approaches to key account management, Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2002) state that the activities for key account management require suppliers to improve the intraorganizational design to increase responsiveness to these critical customer accounts. Responsiveness depends upon the ability of the organization to share and integrate knowledge on the key account. Cannon and Narayandas (2000) suggest that buyers expect suppliers to "provide greater coordination and collaboration in the form of specialized support and value-added service" (p. 408). Yet corporations frequently lack an integrated view of the buyer to enhance comprehensive solutions.

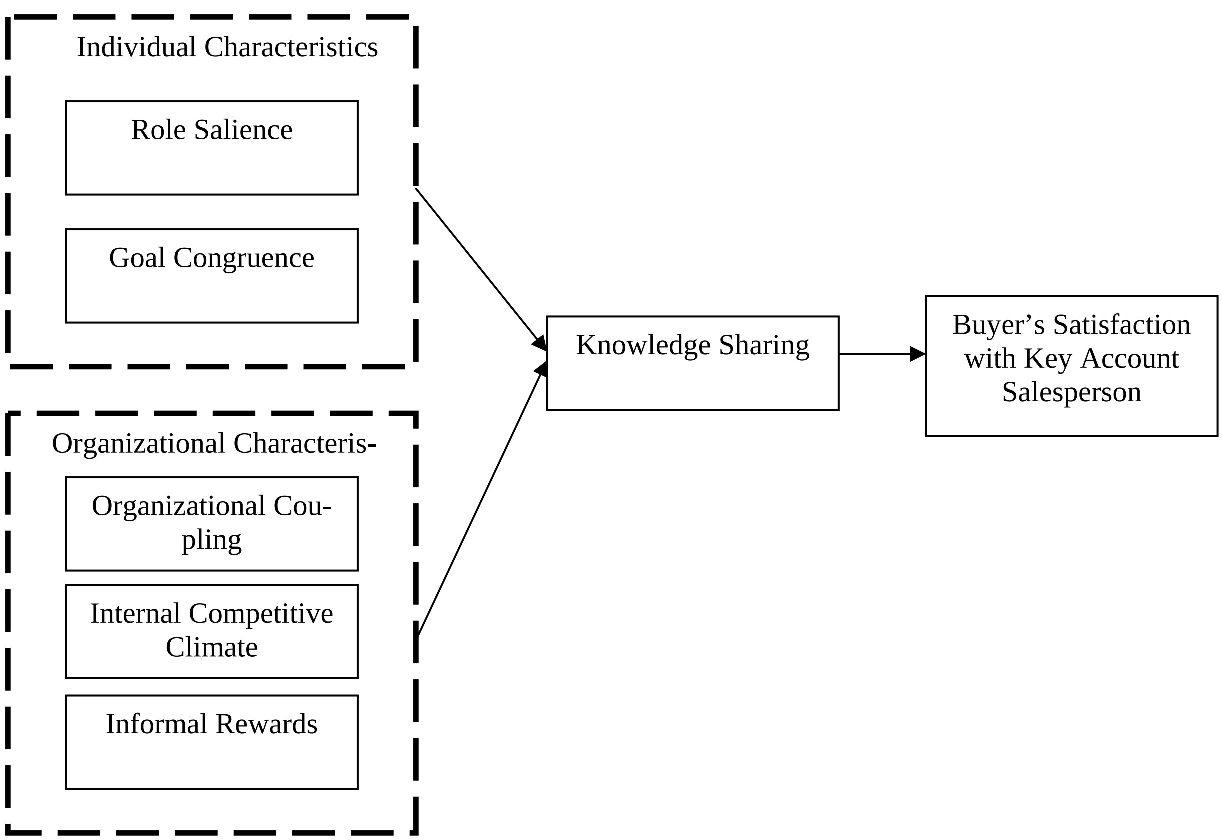
Based upon the literature discussed, individual and organizational drivers of knowledge sharing are identified, and the link between knowledge sharing and buyer's satisfaction with the key account salesperson is proposed. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 guides the remaining discussion.

Individual Characteristics

Salience of Expert Identity. Experts are those in a role of a knowledge specialist within a given area, with specialized knowledge setting them apart from others (Ericsson and Smith 1991; Sonnentag 1998). Expert knowledge is a dynamic blend of information, experience, values, and expert insight (Davenport and Prusak 1998). Within each organization there are employees who have greater levels of different types of expertise than others and that for various reasons stand out among their peers in their endeavors. For example, some key account salespeople may be known for expertise closing a sale, or dealing with internal departments, or structuring creative financing options, or in recognizing early indications of industry changes.

Key account salespeople depend upon their various types of expertise to find ways to leverage capabilities to serve as better solution providers. The salience of this identity as an expert expresses the degree of importance or significance that the salesperson places upon being considered an expert by others. Kleine, Kleine and Kernan (1993) found the frequency that activities are performed in part depends on the salience of one's identity. Thus, as the

FIGURE 1
A Model of Key Account Management Knowledge Transfer and the Impact on the Buyer's Satisfaction



identity as an expert becomes more salient, experts involve themselves in more activities that reinforce their identities as experts. These activities for key account managers might include generating solutions for customers, improving long-term relations, and increasing the share of the customer's business. As the identity as a key account management expert becomes more salient, extra effort on the part of the key account salesperson will be expended (Lobel and St. Clair 1992). Thus, the key account salesperson with a very salient identity may be acquiring a great deal of knowledge from actively being engaged in the management of the account. Yet, Argote and Ingram (2000) contend that the more salient a person's identity, the more difficult it is for the person to share information with others.

Consistent with social identity theory, while perceived expertise is embedded within a social context, and thus a certain amount of knowledge sharing is necessary initially to be perceived as an expert, a salesperson might be more cautious of sharing too much knowledge so as to retain his/her status. The more salient the identity as an expert is to the salesperson, the less likely he/she is to share knowledge. The expert may share knowledge unrelated to account management, such as personal financial advice or travel tips. By sharing general, non-account management knowledge with others, the expert may maintain his status as generally knowledgeable without sharing valuable information. Therefore:

P_1: As the salience of the key account salesperson's identity as an expert increases, knowledge sharing will decrease.

Goal Congruence. Goal congruence is the degree of alignment between the goals of the key account salesperson and the goals of the key account salesperson's colleagues. The degree of goal congruence has been found to have a positive effect on coordination efforts in the buyer-supplier dyad (Jap 1999), to improve employee satisfaction and contributions to a team when personal performance goals are aligned with team performance goals (Kristof-Brown and Stevens 2001), and to positively influence employee attitudes (Vancouver, Millsap and Peters 1994). Greater goal congruence between two firms has been shown to increase the likelihood that firm members share information and processes across the organizations with one another (Jap 1999). Further, in a longitudinal case study, Pardo et al. (2001) found that knowledge sharing between firms was inhibited by incongruent goals. While these studies examined relationships between buyers and suppliers, we suggest the logic holds for intraorganizational relationships as well. High goal congruence among a key account salesperson and his/her colleagues signals that each member seeks the same ends; thus, the members are more likely to share information aiding in achieving similar goals. Closely aligned goals create the need for similar information and encourage support from organizational members (Kristof-Brown and Stevens 2001). Thus:

P_2: Key account salespeople who perceive greater goal congruence with colleagues will share more knowledge than those perceiving lesser degrees of goal congruence.

Organizational Characteristics

Organizational Coupling. Beekun and Glick (2001:229) describe coupling as "systematic patterns of relationships among organizational elements located within multiple domains and connected by identifiable mechanisms." The dimensions of coupling can be used to examine the relational patterns of an intraorganizational network. The dimensions of coupling are directness, strength, consistency, and dependence (Beekun and Glick 2001). Each of the dimensions are suggested to be positively correlated with one another (Weick 1982), such that looser relational coupling is illustrated by less directness, less strength, less consistency, and less dependence.

The dimensions are described as follows. *Directness* refers to the way communication among the links occurs. The more loosely coupled the network, the less direct the communication patterns. For example, less direct communication patterns exist if a key account salesperson must go through many organizational members to acquire customer account information. Two key dimensions of interaction describe *strength*: frequency and intensity. An account manager may interact infrequently with a fellow employee (loose coupling), but the conversation may be fairly intense and elaborate (tighter coupling). Linkages are stronger where the key account salesperson and a coworker are equally likely to contact one another and do so frequently. *Consistency* relates to the degree of diversity of responses to external events. The more consistently individuals interact and react to external situations, the tighter the coupling. *Dependence* involves the substitutability of relations. The more loosely coupled individuals, the more autonomy that exists. For example, colleagues who depend on one another to effectively manage customer accounts are more tightly coupled.

Key account salespeople with more direct linkages within the firm go through fewer intermediaries to acquire information, and can more easily and quickly share information internally. In a study of network relations in multiunit firms, Hansen (2002) found that shorter paths from one division to another increased the knowledge obtained by each division. O'Dell and Grayson (1998) note that frequently employees are not simply hoarding information, but are merely unaware of who might benefit from specific knowledge they possess. Direct links created and maintained by the key account manager lower the boundaries of knowledge transfer and aid the key account salesperson in knowing who in the organization might need or provide specific information. The social network literature suggests that stronger, more direct, dependent links are more likely to share information with one another (Lai and Wong 2002). More frequent and direct interactions among dependent partners are likely to lead to the transfer of knowledge, while looser coupling may improve conditions for searching for useful knowledge, tighter coupling enhances the transfer of knowledge (Hansen 1999). Thus, the following is suggested:

P_3: Tighter organizational coupling (more direct, stronger, more consistent, and more dependent ties) among key account salespeople increases knowledge sharing.

Internal Competitive Climate. A competitive climate within the organization intensifies the hunt for and protection of useful knowledge. The in-fighting resulting from an internal competitive climate is likely to result in a protective stance over knowledge in one's domain (Gaynor 1989). Thus, under conditions of perceived competition within an organization, attempts to increase the acquisition of information are likely to escalate, but the negative influence of the competitive climate will decrease the amount of knowledge actually shared.

Interesting parallels can be drawn from research on firm reactions to competitive intensity in the industry. Day and Wensley (1988) suggest that frequently firms within a competitive industry mimic the behaviors of competitors. Extending this logic to intraorganizational competition, we would expect knowledge hoarding behavior to be mimicked, thus further decreasing the amount of knowledge shared within the firm. Although Han, Kim and Srivastava (1998) found that in conditions of intense industry competition firms seek to learn as much as possible about competitors, the attempts to learn do not translate into a willingness to share on the part of competitors. In a competitive climate, a key account salesperson is less motivated to assist other employees in achieving their goals, thus is less likely to share key account knowledge (Brickson 2000). Hence, a competitive climate within the organization is likely to stimulate the desire to obtain information, but not the proactive sharing of information. Thus:

P_4: The greater the internal competitive climate, the less knowledge sharing will occur within the organization.

Informal Rewards. Reward structures have been identified as a key determinant of integration among employees (Coombs and Gomez-Mejia 1991), and as influential in gaining cooperation of employees (Brickson 2000). However, few firms use formal reward structures to encourage information sharing behaviors among employees (O'Dell and Grayson 1998). Lack of formal reward structures for knowledge sharing may result from managers' concerns with how best to distribute the rewards and on what criteria the rewards should be based. Thus, firms may rely on informal rewards to encourage behavior and outcomes that are desired, but difficult to link to formal reward systems. A key account salesperson may receive informal rewards from colleagues in various forms including gratitude, reciprocation, inside information before official release, and/or leads for new business. As key account salespeople perceive the likelihood of receiving informal rewards for sharing knowledge, they are more likely to exhibit knowledge sharing behavior. Thus:

P_5: Informal rewards for sharing knowledge increase knowledge sharing.

Buyer's Satisfaction with the Key Account Salesperson. In relational exchanges, solutions to customer problems very often cross traditional organizational boundaries (Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990). This is especially the case in key account management where multiple functions within the company may be involved with the key account and coordinated by the key account manager (Homburg, Workman and Jensen 2002). Knowledge sharing enhances key account salespeople's awareness of resources located across the firm, and enables key account salespeople to identify and locate needed resources for customers. Invaluable ideas may be shared and generated as key account salespeople exchange critical customer information. Further, key account salespeople who share account information with fellow employees are more likely to gain a deeper, more comprehensive view of the account from the feedback from other members of the organization. This knowledge gained can enhance the customer's perception and confidence in the key account salesperson's expertise, and thus affect overall satisfaction with the salesperson.

As the key account salesperson becomes known for sharing information, other members of the organization may reciprocate with information that can enhance the salesperson's performance. The insights and benefits the key account salesperson gains from proactively sharing key account knowledge can result in improved service to the buyer. The salesperson's interactions with the customer have been found to be a critical component of customer satisfaction (Homburg and Rudolph 2001). A more well-informed salesperson can create more meaningful interactions with the customer. Sharing knowledge with other employees allows the key account salesperson an opportunity to brainstorm with others and to determine more cost-effective and appropriate fit between the supplier's capabilities and the buyer's needs. Hence:

P_6: Knowledge sharing increases the buyer's satisfaction with the key account salesperson.

CONCLUSION

Organizations continue to struggle to find effective ways to replicate best practices and gain competitive advantage from the integration of knowledge. Central to our contribution is the identification of how knowledge sharing is shaped and encouraged by key social and behavioral forces within the organization. By illuminating buyers' satisfaction with the key account salesperson as a critical account outcome of intraorganizational knowledge sharing, we further substantiate the value of key account knowledge sharing across organizational members.

Theoretical Implications

Given calls by marketing scholars to move beyond understanding knowledge application by an individual to knowledge transfer and integration embedded within an organization, this research attempts to address issues that are both timely and relevant by offering a unique combination of the impact of individual and organizational factors in the facilitation of key account knowledge sharing. Further, given that the phenomenon of knowledge sharing is both complex and rooted in social contexts, this paper focuses on both social and behavioral aspects of knowledge sharing to provide a deeper understanding of the process. Finally, by linking knowledge sharing to buyer satisfaction with the key account salesperson, this research delineates the impact of knowledge sharing on an account-relevant outcome. A developed understanding of the influences on knowledge sharing is critical to advancing literature on key account management and key account salesperson effectiveness. This paper attempts to address an enduring problem in marketing.

Managerial Implications

This paper suggests several levers organizations can manage to realize the benefits of intraorganizational knowledge sharing. First, in terms of structure, organizing key account management teams based on the congruence of the goals and designing work-flow among organizational members that are more direct and dependent is suggested to stimulate the amount of knowledge shared. Second, in terms of rewards, designing reward structures to increase outcomes, but reducing the perceived competition for resources can increase knowledge sharing. Best practices built and established by key account salespeople in less internally competitive environments are more likely to be shared with other key account salespeople. Third, and somewhat counterintuitive, training and socialization efforts that increase the importance that key account salespeople place on their identities as experts may come at the cost of a decreased amount of knowledge shared within the firm.

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