A SOCIAL NETWORKS APPROACH TO MARKET ORIENTATION

MATTHEW T. SEEVERS, Creighton University

By emphasizing the importance of understanding and responding to customer needs as a guiding force behind activities of the firm, perhaps no concept is more fundamental to the marketing discipline than market orientation. Although previous research has implicitly included social relationships as central to the market orientation construct, few researchers have considered the explicit link between social network relationships and market-oriented behaviors. In response to this situation, this conceptual paper sets out to re-examine structural implications of the market orientation construct using a social networks approach. An attempt is made to draw parallels between Kohli and Jaworski's (1990) conceptualization of market orientation and the strength of ties perspective advanced by Granovetter (1973; 1982). A series of testable propositions are derived that link prior research in social networks to each of the three behavioral components of market orientation. The paper concludes with a discussion of managerial and research implications.

INTRODUCTION

By emphasizing the importance of understanding and responding to customer needs as a guiding force behind activities of the firm, perhaps no concept is more fundamental to the marketing discipline than market orientation. In their seminal work, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) conceptualized market orientation as composed of three sets of firm activities: (1) organization-wide generation of market intelligence, (2) dissemination of intelligence across functional departments, and (3) organization-wide responsiveness to gathered intelligence. Subsequent empirical studies have demonstrated that a firm's market orientation is positively related to employee attitudes (Jaworski and Kohli 1993), customer orientation among salespeople (Pelham 2009), trust in channel relationships (Siguaw, Simpson, and Baker 1998), product-service innovation (Grinstein 2008; Morgan and Berthon 2008; Ordanini and Maglio 2009), new product success (Im and Workman 2004), and broad measures of business performance (Narver and Slater 1990; Song and Parry 2009).

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The most recent decade has shown an increasing interest in the link between market orientation and interfirm relationships (e.g., Homburg, Grozdanovic, and Klarmann 2007; Ramani and Kumar 2008). For example, Hunt and Lambe (2000) suggest that to the extent that collaboration is important to delivering superior customer value, "a key orientation missing in the present conceptualization of [market orientation] is a firm's partnering orientation" (p. 28). Similarly, Rindfleisch and Moorman (2001) encourage an investigation of the relationship between market orientation and alliance participation. Presumably underlying the call to action is the belief that a firm's network of interfirm relationships may prove beneficial as a source of market intelligence. Thus, continued inquiries on this topic would seem to benefit from a perspective that permits examination of the nature, characteristics, and structure of the relationships that define a firm's position in the marketplace.

One such approach that satisfies this need is the research tradition known as social networks analysis. In general, social networks analysis provides a framework and set of methodological tools for the assessment of how the structure of social relationships correlates with the flow of resources contained within the network. For instance, Rindfleisch and Moorman (2001) found that relational embeddedness among alliance partnerships is positively linked to acquisition of product information in the context of new product development. Given that a chief concern of market orientation is the acquisition of market information, the use of social networks analysis may allow for a broader understanding of how the firm's interfirm relationships affects its ability to do so. Furthermore, social networks analysis allows for an assessment of relationships among social actors within the firm, thus lending insight into how information is transferred within the firm. In sum, viewing market orientation from a social networks perspective may provide key theoretical and managerial insights into how a firm's set of relationships may be structured so as to develop an appropriate market orientation.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a conceptual exploration of relationships that may exist between a firm's market orientation and its concurrent structure of social relationships. An empirical relationship is ultimately expected given that market orientation is broadly concerned with the extraction of market information and its subsequent transfer towards a market response, while social networks analysis helps us to understand the structural pathways and constraints on such activities. A series of proposed linkages between the two research streams are organized by examining the relationship of each of the three behavioral components of market orientation proposed by Kohli and Jaworski (1990). And while numerous social network variables might be examined, this paper restricts its scope to perhaps the most commonly addressed variable, tie strength (Granovetter 1973). This paper follows efforts to examine the impact of the firm's relational embeddedness within its interfirm environment (e.g., Gulati 1995; Uzzi 1997; Palmatier 2008) as well as prior efforts to examine the role of intrafirm ties on interfunctional coordination (Hansen 1999; Nelson 1989).

In order to place market-oriented behavior in its proper context, the paper begins with a brief background on the use of social networks analysis in organizational research. This is followed with a review of the market orientation literature. Particular emphasis is placed upon Kohli and Jaworski's (1990) conceptualization of market orientation as three distinct behavioral components. Next, a series of testable propositions are derived that link prior research in social networks to each of the three behavioral components of market orientation. The paper concludes with a discussion of managerial and research implications, including suggestions for future research.

SOCIAL NETWORKS ANALYSIS

Social networks analysis is a methodological perspective that places the relationship between two or more social actors (e.g., individual, group, organization) as the focal unit of analysis (Scott 2000). Researchers then proceed to examine the pattern of relationships that exist (or do not exist) between or among these actors. A basic premise of all social networks research is that the structure of a network is correlated with the flow of resources contained within and accessible to the network. Typical resources of interest within organizational literature include information, power, and financial resources. From a purely structural perspective of these relationships (Mayhew 1980), researchers expect the pattern of relationships to have a profound impact on the behavior of those entities within the network. The more relaxed view that is adopted here and one that is more common to organization research allows for entities (e.g., individuals, organizations) to both influence and be influenced by the pattern of network linkages (e.g., Kilduff and Krackhardt 1994).

A key benefit of a social networks approach stems from its methodological flexibility. One may examine the pattern of relationships that exist among individuals, groups, organizations, or even groups of organizations. In addition, social networks analysis allows the researcher to explore either the network as a whole or the network centered on a focal actor, also known as an ego-centered network (Scott 2000). The flexibility of this approach when applied to organizational research provides an opportunity to examine both the relational ties within the organization and the relational ties that span from actors in a focal organization to actors in another organization.

Within the social networks literature, one of the most useful approaches to study the flow of information is the *strength of ties* perspective (Granovetter 1973; 1982). In addition to a focus on the structure of relationships, the relative strength of any one relationship in the network is considered a key variable for not only the flow of information, but also for the content of the information. The determinants of tie strength are a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy [mutual confiding], and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter 1973, p. 348). Strong relational ties are beneficial to individuals and organizations because participants tend to be more highly motivated to provide assistance. Granovetter (1973) notes, however, that weak ties are pivotal sources of information because they provide a "bridge" to individuals outside the focal group. Hence, weak ties tend to provide more diversity and less redundancy in the information accessible within one's network.

Prior research using a strength of ties perspective has examined the flow of information in both intrafirm and interfirm contexts. Hansen (1999), for example, studied the impact of tie strength on the transfer of knowledge among organizational subunits in a new product development setting. His results suggest that while strong ties are important for the transfer of complex knowledge among subunits, weak ties are better suited to the search for and transfer of highly codified knowledge. Taking an interfirm perspective, Uzzi (1997) concluded from field interviews that strong ties among organizations improved the transfer of fine-grained information and promoted joint problem-solving arrangements.

In this paper, both intrafirm and interfirm ties will be considered. Because the market orientation construct is based upon the flow of market information as its primary objective, social networks analysis provides an appropriate perspective. This approach allows for a simultaneous examination of (1) the flow of market intelligence from the market to the firm (i.e., interfirm), (2) the flow of market intelligence between and among functional departments within the firm (i.e., intrafirm), and (3) the coordinated usage of market intelligence in the design and implementation of a timely response (i.e., both interfirm and intrafirm). The paper now turns to a review of the market orientation literature prior to development of testable propositions.

MARKET ORIENTATION

Although it has only been formalized within the past decade, the market orientation construct can be traced back to prior development of the marketing concept. Felton (1959) first described the marketing concept as the integration of marketing activities across the entire firm for the purpose of maximizing profits. King (1965, p. 85) added that its purpose was to help "consumers solve selected problems in ways compatible with planned enhancement of the profit position of the firm." McNamara (1972, p. 51) gave perhaps the most comprehensive definition of the marketing concept: "a philosophy of business management, based upon a company-wide acceptance of the need for customer orientation, profit orientation, and recognition of the important role of marketing in communicating the needs of the market to all major corporate departments."

Even though consensus was slowly forming, researchers voiced concerns about the adequacy of the marketing concept for use in practice. Barksdale and Darden (1971) suggested that a major challenge for the marketing concept was the development of an operational definition. Day and Wensley (1983) further noted that the marketing concept had failed to address the firm's need take a broader view of its market by accounting for the impact of competition on the needs of its customers. An additional concern held by some researchers was the inclusion of profitability as a core component of the marketing concept, as opposed to a natural outcome of its implementation (Levitt 1969; Bell and Emory 1971).

In response to these criticisms, a movement began to delineate the specific activities that reflect a firm's implementation of the marketing concept. During this time, researchers began to use the term *market orientation* almost interchangeably with the term *marketing concept.* Shapiro (1988), for example, centered market orientation around the activities of collection and usage of market information. Webster (1988) also clarified that the use of market intelligence rather than marketing intelligence was preferable in that it captures the need to take a broader view of the influences of consumer behavior.

The movement to clarify both the marketing concept and market orientation culminated in the research program of Kohli and Jaworski (1990). In their initial work, the authors set out to specify the domain of market orientation upon an extensive review of the literature as well as conducting a series of in-depth interviews. The first important product of their work was simply to recognize market orientation as the set of firm activities that are antecedent to, and consistent with, an implementation of the marketing concept (Kohli and Jaworski 1990). Another key outcome was to provide a definition of the market orientation construct that specified the set of behaviors that are characteristic of a market-oriented firm.

> Market orientation is the organizationwide *generation* of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, *dissemination* of the intelligence across departments, and organizationwide *responsiveness* to it (Kohli and Jaworski 1990, p. 6, emphasis in original).

Thus, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) highlight three distinct behavioral components that typify the market-oriented firm. The first of these, intelligence generation, is the behavior of the firm that allows it to extract market information necessary to understand and anticipate customer needs. The authors note that the generation of market intelligence requires a diverse set of complementary mechanisms. For example, the firm may rely on customer surveys, test markets, and analysis of sales reports. However, they also suggest that this activity cannot merely rely on information gathered at arm's length. Instead, the market-oriented firm seems to benefit from some level of embeddedness within its market environment. Such activity is likely to include a number of formal and informal means including, for instance, "meetings and discussions with customer and trade partners" (Kohli and Jaworski 1990, p. 4).

Intelligence dissemination is the second behavioral component of market orientation and it entails the set of activities undertaken by a market-oriented firm to efficiently distribute market information across functional departments. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) discuss two primary issues for this component. First, they note the importance of participation across all departments within the organization. Their emphasis on company-wide intelligence dissemination clearly echoes the original notion of the marketing concept. The authors also emphasize the value of informal means of intelligence dissemination; in fact, they report from their field interviews that managers viewed "informal 'hall talk' is an extremely powerful tool for keeping employees tuned to customers and their needs" (Kohli and Jaworski 1990, p. 5).

The third component of market orientation is organizationwide responsiveness to market intelligence. In simple terms, responsiveness entails the set of actions undertaken by the entire firm in reaction to changes in customer needs. Such actions might include, for example, development of new products, modification to existing product lines, and reaction to competitor pricing. Scale development work by Kohli, Jaworski, and Kumar (1993) further implies that firm responsiveness is reflected in the usage of relevant market intelligence and the timeliness of the firm's market response. In that market response seems to depend in large part on the firm's ability to disseminate market intelligence, responsiveness and intelligence dissemination appear to be closely linked.

PROPOSITIONS

A series of testable propositions are now derived from the literature of both market orientation and the strength of ties perspective from social networks analysis. Guiding each of these theoretical predictions is the underlying premise that prior work on market orientation and tie strength intersect when market information acquisition and utilization are the focal variables of interest. Propositions are developed in sequence for each of the three behavioral components as conceptualized in the work of Kohli and Jaworski (1990). No attempt is made to propose a causal ordering of the proposed relationships.

Intelligence Generation

An implicit assumption in the market orientation literature that underlies intelligence generation is that market intelligence originates from outside the boundaries of the firm. Thus it seems likely that the firm's ability to capture to information about its customers, suppliers, competitors, and other environmental forces should rely at least in part on its ability to gain access to each of these sources. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) have suggested that market-oriented firms meet regularly with channel partners (i.e., customers and suppliers) to make sense of emerging trends. Outlining the strength of ties position, Granovetter (1973) argued that as social actors spend more time interacting with one another, such as through meetings and discussion, they are more likely to develop strong ties that allow for increased access and assistance from one another.

Rindfleisch and Moorman (2001) found evidence that relationships between a firm and its channel partners tend to have higher levels of closeness and reciprocity as compared to relationships with competitors. They also found that found that a higher level of embeddedness was positively related to information acquisition in a new product development context. Similarly, Uzzi (1997) found that information exchange in embedded relationships among entrepreneurial firms was characterized by an increased willingness to share proprietary and strategic information. Based on this evidence, a significant relationship is expected to exist between a firm's ability to generate market intelligence and its propensity to develop strong tie relationships with its channel partners.

> **P_1**: The greater the ability of the firm to generate market intelligence, the more likely the firm is to hold strong tie relationships with its customers and suppliers.

Although the information gathered directly from customers and suppliers may provide the firm with much needed insights into the needs and preferences of its customers, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) warn that such information may be insufficient. They argue that market intelligence includes "an analysis of how [customers] may be affected by exogenous factors such as government regulation, technology, competitors, and other environmental forces" (Kohli and Jaworski 1990, p. 4). This implies that the market-oriented firm must have access to sources capable of providing information that is both unique and original. In the strength of ties literature, this is termed nonredundant information.

Granovetter (1973; 1982) argues that weak ties are the best source for nonredundant information because they provide access to sources of information not otherwise available. Networks of strong ties are characterized by mutual connected actors who tend to interact frequently and thus possess a great deal of similar information. In contrast, weak ties are exemplified by relationships to others who are otherwise unrelated to actors in the focal actor's immediate network. They instead provide a bridge to new and different social circles and thus provide access to nonredundant information. While much of the evidence in support of the weak ties hypothesis has been developed at an individual level of analysis, support for the strength of weak ties in an organizational setting has begun to emerge. McEvily and Zaheer (1999) found that nonredundancy among interfirm contacts was positively associated with the firm's competitive scanning capabilities.

> **P_2**: The greater the ability of the firm to generate market intelligence, the greater number of weak tie relationships it will hold with competitors and organizations outside of its channels of distribution.

Intelligence Dissemination

Once market intelligence has been successfully extracted from outside the boundaries of the organization, the market-oriented firm seeks to efficiently distribute the information to the appropriate functional department within the organization. An important assumption that underlies the activities of intelligence dissemination is that the department that acquires the information is not always best suited to utilize the information. To deal with this problem, most firms strive for an organizational structure that is best suited to efficiently transfer information. Yet despite efforts to develop formal mechanisms for information transfer, most organizations are faced with inefficiencies that result from the necessary separation of functions.

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) recognized the need for informal communication in keeping the entire firm in tune with the needs of its customers. Harris (2000) provides empirical evidence that interdepartmental connectedness is positively linked to market orientation. This was also previously demonstrated in greater detail by Jaworski and Kohli (1993) who found that interdepartmental connectedness was positively associated with intelligence dissemination. More recently, Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden (2005) argued that interdepartmental connectedness may also serve to counter the negative impact of highly centralized organizational structure on market orientation "by ensuring contact among employees and fostering information flow" (p. 29). From a strength of ties perspective this implies that those firms who excelled in intelligence dissemination likely benefited from the existence of strong ties among its functional departments. In support of this conclusion, Hansen (1999) found that while weak ties are well suited for information search, strong ties are more favorable to the transfer of complex information between departmental units.

> **P_3**: The greater the ability of the firm to disseminate market intelligence, the more likely the firm is to exhibit strong tie relationships among its functional departments.

In contrast to expected benefits of connectedness, conflict tends to inhibit the transfer of information among interdepartmental functions. Jaworski and Kohli (1993) found that interdepartmental conflict was negatively associated with intelligence dissemination. In the market orientation literature, Harris (2000) successfully replicated this finding. Empirical findings from the social networks analysis literature suggest that conflict within an organization is likely related to the structure of network ties. Nelson (1989) found that low conflict organizations are characterized by a higher degree of strong ties between functional departments as compared to high conflict organizations. Labianca, Brass, and Gray (1998) found evidence that negative relationships with members of other workgroups led to higher perceptions of intergroup conflict. In addition, they found that low cohesiveness among group members contributed to perceptions of increased conflict among their department and other departments in the organization. These findings support the following proposition:

P_4: The greater the ability of the firm to disseminate market intelligence, the less likely the firm is to exhibit high levels of conflict in the relationships among its functional departments.

Responsiveness

The ability of the firm to respond to market intelligence is largely a function of its ability to develop and implement its response in a timely manner. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) suggest that responsiveness is dependent upon the cooperation of various functional departments within the firm. Consistent with this statement, Jaworski and Kohli (1993) found that interdepartmental conflict was negatively related to firm responsiveness. Prior research indicates however that the existence of strong tie relationships among functional departments should contribute to increased responsiveness by dampening levels of interdepartmental conflict and improving the coordinated use of market intelligence. As previously described, Nelson's (1989) finding predicts that the level of conflict between functional departments should be dampened in the presence of strong tie relationships. In addition, Hansen (1999) found that strong ties were associated with faster completion times of new product development when the project required the use of complex and tacit knowledge.

P_5: The greater the ability of the firm to respond to market intelligence, the more likely the firm is to exhibit strong tie relationships among its functional departments.

In addition to intrafirm factors, a firm's responsiveness to market intelligence is also likely to benefit from the level of cooperation that exists between the firm and its channel partners. Uzzi (1997) notes two distinct benefits from strong tie relationships between the firm and its customers and suppliers. First, he notes that embedded ties "entail problem-solving mechanisms that enable actors to coordinate functions and work out problems 'on the fly'" (Uzzi 1997, p. 47). Second, he found that strong tie relationships promote economies of time and allow firms to quickly respond to market intelligence. Additional support is provided by Rindfleisch and Moorman (2001) who demonstrated that relational embeddedness is positively related to both new product creativity *and* speed of new product development.

P_6: The greater the ability of the firm to respond to market intelligence, the more likely the firm is to hold strong tie relationships with its customers and suppliers.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this paper has been to explore the relationships that may exist between a firm's market orientation and its concomitant structure of social relationships. The basic premise of this analysis is that an empirical relationship is likely to exist given the common concern over the flow of information across a series of social actors exhibited independently by the two literature streams. Furthermore, Kohli and Jaworski's (1990) conceptualization of market orientation lends itself quite well to an attempt to draw parallels between market orientation and social networks analysis. The paper now turns to a discussion of both managerial implications and suggestions for future research.

Managerial Implications

An ongoing discussion within the marketing literature concerns the practical value of market orientation to the firm's day-to-day operations. While previous research has clearly established a positive relationship between market orientation and business performance, the mechanisms that drive the relationship have not always been clear. Pending the results of future empirical examination, support of the abovementioned propositions would suggest that market orientation may be improved through the systematic development of relationships both between the functional departments of the firm and between the firm and its channel partners. For example, the firm might assess the strength of existing relationships among its functional departments. An alternative focus might center on a drive to increase the firm's interaction with its customers and suppliers. In either case, the prescription for managers is both tangible and accessible to the firm and its employees.

This line of research is also likely to spawn a series of practical, yet unresolved questions about how managers might incorporate social networks logic in the implementation of market orientation. For example, how much organizational learning about customers or competitors must be derived through direct interpersonal contact, as opposed to research conducted at arm's length? Furthermore, which firms in the interfirm market are best to reach for effective intelligence generation? Research in the field of retail purchasing has demonstrated that purchasing agents often seek out the advice of their peers in competing firms (Hirschman and Mazursky 1982; Kline and Wagner 1994). And while the market orientation broadly supports this approach, direct ties may be severely limited in many industry settings. Future research is needed to provide more useful prescription for managers.

Research Implications

Within the marketing literature, some scholars have questioned the maturity of the market orientation construct. Hunt and Lambe (2000, p. 28) note: "[Market orientation] lacks an underlying theory that could provide an explanatory mechanism for the positive relationship between [market orientation] and business performance." Albeit a simple mechanism, the firm's pattern and quality of network relationships provides a promising explanation for the impact of the firm's market orientation on business performance. One argument that would support this contention stems from Granovetter's (1985) argument for social embeddedness of economic exchange. While classical economics assumes that both firms and individuals engage in strictly discrete market transactions, Granovetter (1985) recognized that much of what we observe in actual economic behavior includes both discrete one-time exchanges and ongoing exchange based upon trust and the achievement of joint interest. Following similar logic, the acquisition and utilization of market information seems unlikely to occur only at arm's length or from within the safe confines of the firm. Once again, casual observation of actual market behavior suggests that relationships between both firms and individuals provide a critical link between the firm's activities and the success of those activities. Additional theoretical and empirical work is clearly needed to establish network relationships as a principal mechanism behind market orientation.

For the sake of clarity, the current analysis and resulting propositions have been restricted to a narrow set of social networks concepts, principally strength of ties. Future research would benefit from an expanded set of variables. One alternative to the tie strength approach is *structural holes*, which are said to exist when two direct contacts held by an individual are themselves not tied by a direct relationship (Burt 1992). The structural hole is valuable because it enables an individual to reach nonredundant contacts in different social cliques. From a market orientation perspective, structural holes would be particularly useful in intelligence generation activities, such as when boundary spanning individuals develop interpersonal networks to contacts in buying firms, supplier firms, or perhaps alliance partners. Burt (1992) has argued that boundary spanners with networks rich in structural holes tend to access marketplace information that is more accurate and timely.

Another social networks variable that could enhance understanding of market orientation is *network density*, which refers to the proportion of the present dyadic relationships among a set of actors to the maximum number of possible dyadic relationships (Wasserman and Faust 1994). In plain terms, network density is a sociometric measure of "connectedness" within a network, such that a high density network may be characterized by a situation in which "everyone knows everyone else." This concept holds promise for the investigation of a firm's coordination as it relates to both intelligence generation and responsiveness. We might expect, for example, that a high level of density within a firm may reduce interfunctional conflict, thus promoting coordination of information transfer.

Finally, empirical testing of the propositions set forth in this paper poses a number of method-related challenges. First, comparison of network measures between multiple firms is difficult given that network size typically varies greatly among organizations (Scott 2000). Second, the effort required to collect network data typically presents limitations on the size of networks that can be effectively examined. Finally, establishing causal relationships through longitudinal analysis of network relationships is problematic given that network relationships are highly sensitive to the passage of time. In all cases, replication of network studies may hold the key to gaining theoretical consensus.

CONCLUSION

By positioning an emphasis on understanding and responding to customer needs as a guiding force behind activities of the firm, market orientation is considered to be one of the truly fundamental concepts within the marketing discipline. Although previous research has implicitly included social relationships as core to the market orientation construct, prior analysis has paid almost no attention to the explicit link between social network relationships and market-oriented behaviors. In response to this situation, this paper set out to re-examine the structural implications of the market orientation construct using a social networks approach.

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