(Abstract of work in progress)

Enhancing Perceived Value of Customer Solutions:

The Role of Dialog

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Abstract section I:

The purpose of this abstract is to identify value contributions of marketing communication based upon a presented conceptualization of perceived value of customer solutions and to shed insights in the role of dialog as a form of communicative interaction in enhancing perceived value of customer solutions.

Abstract section II:

Our findings document that value contributions of marketing communication require first of all a special form of interaction between the supplier and the customer over time. It is argued that dialog is a form of communicative interaction that affects the dimensions of perceived customer value of solutions in various ways, because it leads to an improved understanding of each other´s point of view, creates mutual agreements and generates different kinds of knowledge that are necessary to co-create high valued customer solutions and additionally supports the incremental development of trust and commitment and thus also enhances perceived relationship value.

1. Introduction

Due to the growing capabilities of competitors from low cost countries, homogenization of offerings and differentiation of customer needs, companies in established industrial nations are faced with increased competition. To cope with the pressure of increased competition firms are continuously moving away from offering individual products or services toward providing complete customer solutions, which are usually seen as an integrated combination of products and services designed to solve a particular customer problem [e.g. Sawhney 2006, p. 365]. Customer solutions indisputable offer a chance to achieve sustainable competitive advantages, but in practice three out of four companies see little gain in the supply of customer solutions [Johansson et al. 2003, p. 117]. In order to build a competitive advantage companies have to make sure that their solution offerings deliver high value to customers [e.g. Ravald and Grönroos 1996, p. 19], because perceived value is of significant importance for customer purchase decisions in business-to-business markets [Ulaga and Eggert 2006, pp. 119]. Therefore it is critical for companies to understand customer's perception of solution value and to find out how solutions can be enhanced to provide high value to customers [Lapierre 2000, p. 122]. Despite a growing body of literature on perceived value [Ulaga and Eggert 2005; 2006], the current marketing literature provides limited insights on how organizational customers assess the value of customer solutions. Furthermore theoretical and empirical evidence in the relationship and services marketing literature suggests that marketing communication can affect customer's perception of value [e.g. Bruhn and Georgi 2006, pp. 267]. Although the issue of marketing communication for customer solutions already received attention [e.g. Simao 2006], value contributions of marketing communication for customer solutions have not been explored. Accordingly, the first objective of our study is to present a conceptualization of perceived value in the context of customer solutions based upon existing value research and to identify thereby caused challenges for marketing communication. Recently it has been argued that dialog is a useful orientation of marketing communication to increase mutual value in buyer-supplier exchanges [e.g. Ballantyne and Varney 2006, Ballantyne 2004; Grönroos 2000, 2004], but the role of dialog as a form of communicative interaction to improve perceived value of customer solutions has not been investigated. Therefore the second objective of this research is to show how dialog gives consideration to the identified challenges of marketing communication for customer solutions and thereby to shed insights in the role of dialog in enhancing perceived value of customer solutions. A third objective of this research – so far serving as a research agenda – is to develop a framework for the effective management of dialog that works well for customer solutions. The following section first of all introduces characteristics of customer solutions that have implications for perceived customer value, before a conceptualization of perceived customer value with a focus on customer solution is presented. In the next section we derive challenges of marketing communication in supporting the perceived value creation of customer solutions. After giving a brief overview of the conceptual background of dialog, we show the possibilities a dialog offers to encounter this challenges. This paper closes with a short outlook on directions for future research concerning the development of a management framework.

2. Perceived value of customer solutions: Dimensions and contribution of marketing communication

2.1 The Concept of a customer solution and dimensions of its perceived value

The concept of a customer solution
Today customer solutions enjoy intense attention both in theory and in practice. Many companies are shifting their strategy toward integrating product and services in new business offerings called customer or synonymously integrated solutions [e.g. Davies 2004, pp. 727; Windahl and Lakemond 2006, pp. 806] in order to gain higher margins. The intensified marketing of customer solutions results from the insight that customers are not longer interested anymore in products and services per se but in solutions for problems they are confronted with in their life and business [Sawhney 2006, p. 365]. While the literature contains a variety of definitions of customer solutions [e.g. Tuli et al. 2007, p. 4; Sawhney 2006, p. 369; Johansson et al. 2003, p. 118; Foote et al. 2001, p. 84], a view of solutions as a customized and integrated combination of products and services is predominant and the following three commonalities occur across definitions [Tuli et al. 2007, p. 4]: First of all, a customer solution involves a combination of products and services. Second, these products and services are designed to meet a customer's specific needs and are therefore customized. Third, the components of the solution are systematically coordinated and should work with each other. Hence, a solution consists of an integrated set of products and services aimed at allowing customers to achieve better outcomes than the sum of individual components of the solution. Recently Tuli et al. [2007, pp. 4] have shown in an empirical study that most customers view a solution not only as a customized and integrated bundle of products and services but additionally focus on customer-supplier relational processes. According to the results of this study customers view solutions as a set of four relational processes (customer requirements definition, customization and integration of products and services, their deployment, and postdeployment customer support) which are aimed at meeting their business needs. The customers' perceived relational exchange involved in customer solutions, the degree of individualization and the degree of integration are three characteristics of customer solutions which may have an

impact of their perceptions of value. Therefore customers' assessments of these characteristics of a customer solution are incorporated as dimensions of perceived customer value in the following conceptualization of the construct. This conceptualization is developed drawing on the existing body of knowledge of perceived customer value and accounting for the characteristics of customer solutions.

Dimensions of perceived value of customer solutions
To determine the value a customer obtains from an offering, it is inevitable to contrast all the benefits a customer gets from this offering to all the sacrifices he has to accept [Ravald and Grönroos 1996, p. 20]. Perceived customer value can hence be defined as: the ratio of perceived benefits relative to perceived sacrifices [Monroe 2003, p. 191], whereas the perceived sacrifices include not only the price but also all the monetary and non-monetary costs the customer has to invest [Zeithaml et al 2006, pp. 517; Ravald and Grönroos 1996, pp. 21]. Following, to provide a higher customer value, a company can either increase the perceived benefits or lower the perceived costs of a customer solution [Ulaga and Eggert 2006, p. 119]. In order to assess if a customer solution indeed contributes to high perceived customer value, it is necessary to find out which dimensions the customer uses to judge the offering. Summarizing the relevant literature, the following key dimensions of perceived customer value can be found, which are shortly named and described in the following [for more detail see e.g. Ulaga and Eggert 2006, pp. 119; Ulaga and Eggert 2005, pp. 74; Gao et al. 2005, pp. 24; Lapierre 2000, pp. 123].

One of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of perceived value of customer solutions is related to *integration* [e.g. Sawhney 2006, pp. 369]. In some works integration is further subdivided into technical integration, marketing integration and operational integration [e.g. Sawhney 2006, pp. 369]. Integration can result in perceived benefits as well as in perceived costs of the customer solution. *Integration benefits* will be perceived, if according to the customers' view the benefits of the integrated solution exceed the benefits of the sum of the single components [e.g. Sawhney 2006, pp. 369]. *Integration costs* associated with the customer solution stem from the need to integrate the customer solution in their own production processes, so that customers have to bear additional process costs [Ulaga and Eggert 2005, pp. 81]. Another category of perceived benefits of customer solutions refers to the nature of customer solutions and represents whether the problem has been solved effectively from a customers' point of view. The comparison of the target state with the actual state is reflected in perceived *effective benefits*. For the reason that a customer solution is per definition always directed to solve a specific customer problem, it is characterized by some degree of individualization. This causes perceived *individualization benefits* as well as *individualization costs*. *Individualization benefits* arise from customization for the customer's specific needs and context [Sawhney 2006, p. 370]. The development and implementation of individualized customer solutions often requires specific investments on the customer´s side which are useless in any other business relationship and this is associated with perceived *individualization costs*. Due to the perceived relational exchange involved in customer solutions and due to the personal contact between the company and its customers during the problem solving process an ongoing relationship between these two parties emerges. This relationship also contributes to the total value a customer perceives from the solution, which is usually referred to as *relationship benefits and relationship costs* respectively [Grönroos 2004, pp. 108; Keith et al. 2004, pp. 7; Ravald and Grönroos 1996, pp. 23]. While the duration of the relationship between a company and its customers, trust and commitment are developed. This for example can enhance the perceived *relationship benefits*. *Relationship costs* associated with the establishment and management of relationships are for example costs of the selection and control of a partner as well as for example costs for avoiding or solving conflicts [Gao et al. 2005, pp. 26]. Finally, customers have to endure some more sacrifices dimensions when purchasing and implementing a customer solution. One of them is the *purchase price*. However, perceived sacrifices of a customer solution include not only the price but all the costs (monetary and non-monetary) which occur during the whole lifecycle of the solution [Lapierre 2000, p. 123]. This view in accordance with the "total cost of ownership", implies that the customer considers the *life-cycle-costs* of a solution and hence includes all the costs concerning operating, attending, repairing, enhancing and terminating into his evaluation [Titzkus 2005, p. 54]. Other perceived sacrifices of customer solutions are *acquisition costs*, which describe the costs of the sourcing process [e.g. Ulaga and Eggert 2006, pp. 125]. This category contains all costs the customer perceives before purchase, arising from the search and evaluation of a supplier as well as from the initiation and arrangement of the transaction.

The identified and categorized benefit and sacrifice dimensions of the value construct can be used as a framework to explore value contributions of marketing communications for customer solutions.

2.2 Value contributions of marketing communication

Marketing communication can be expected to affect perceived value of customer solutions in various ways. As this paper presents work in progress we take some main direct influences on the integration, individualization and relationship dimensions of perceived value as examples to identify challenges for marketing communication.

Integration value contributions of marketing communication
To make sure that the value offered by a solution exceeds the value of the sum of the single components and thus the solution provides integration benefits, a permanent exchange of information between the company and its customers is inevitable. As the incremental benefits customers derive from integration can for example arise from technical integration the supplier has to learn more about time and effort the customer needs to integrate products and services himself and how according to the customer's opinion products and services can be engineered to work better together in his company. To reduce perceived integration costs there needs to be constant and open interaction and exchange of knowledge between the company and the customer in the entire deployment process concerning the embedding of the solution into the operational sequences of the customer. During this process customer-information is needed about their internal processes, technical systems and business policies as well as about the political issues in the customer organization in order to allow the supplier to develop a solution which fits into these and thus facilitates an optimal use. Additionally the parties have to find common agreements concerning the deployment process and the necessary activities to enhance the utilities the customers' personnel derives from the solution [Tuli et al. 2007, p. 7].

Effective benefits and individualization value contributions of marketing communication
The realization of effective benefits requires a differentiated research of the primary customer problem and a suitable and corporate formulation of the intended aims. A profound understanding of the specific customer problem and a joint delineating of customer's current and future needs is also necessary to enhance individualization value of a customer solution [e.g. Davies 2004, pp. 733]. Usually a problem consists of an unwanted initial state and a desired target state, which both have to be systematically analyzed. Furthermore, a problem solution contains precise assignments regarding the transformation of the initial into the target state. To develop suggestions concerning the improvement of this transformation the supplier needs information about the customer's actual activities of problem solution. But to enhance perceived value of customer solutions it is not enough to generate an understanding of all relevant aspects of the customer's problem itself in short term interaction processes between customer and supplier. To realize effective benefits and to increase individualization benefits and reduce individualization costs customer and supplier need to generate deep knowledge about each other's requirements and capabilities and based upon this common shared knowledge they have to consider jointly all necessary decisions about the design or configuration of the individualized solution and the tasks each party has to perform. This can only be achieved if the company and the customer are engaged in a conversation over many periods of time with changing topics as comprehensive knowledge about each other is continuously increasing [Jaworski and Kohli 2006, pp. 111]. That is the traditional process in which a firm just "hears" the voice of the customer is not sufficient and should be replaced by a above mentioned approach in which a firm and its customers "co-create" the voice of the customer [Jaworski and Kohli 2006, p. 109].

Relationship value contributions of marketing communication
A striking instrument to attain a high perceived relationship value is to create trust and commitment between the parties involved [e.g. De Lurdes Veludo et al. 2006, p. 200; Young and Albaum 2003, p. 253; Plank et al. 1999, p. 61]. If the parties trust each other control costs etc. are reduced and accordingly the perceived relationship value increases as perceived relationship costs decrease and perceived relationship benefits are enhanced simultaneously. Mutual trust can develop in interaction processes concerning the development and future of the relationship, which are characterized by "(…) listening, asking questions and reflecting on the meaning of the information gathered as a basis for further interaction" [Ballantyne 2004, p. 120]. An important source of trust is relationship specific knowledge, which is based on past experiences, but can be expanded and constantly updated in interactions processes between the parties. Another way to enhance relationship value is to assure a reliable long-term quality of products and services in all episodes of the relationship. This allows the customer an accurate planning of costs and reduces/avoids costs of problems before and after receiving the solution as well as during using the solution [Ravald and Grönroos 1996, pp. 26], so that conflicts and other sources of perceived relationship costs can be reduced. Constant interaction between a firm and its customers allows the company to understand the customer´s needs and hence provides the firm the potential to arise the perceived relationship value.

Summarizing the preceding illustrations, it can be concluded that value contributions of marketing communication require first of all a special form of interaction between the supplier and the customer over time aimed not only at generating a comprehensive understanding of all aspects of the customer solution, but also on developing knowledge and insights in both parties' point of view, requirements, systems, business policies or capabilities. Moreover this interaction must bring opportunities for learning together and co-creating of solutions as well as for the formation of

mutual agreements. In the next section we will argue that dialog is a capable and perceived value enhancing form of interaction in the context of customer solutions.

3. Dialog and its role in enhancing perceived value of customer solutions

Although dialog is the object of some research studies since the early nineties [e.g. Ballantyne 2004; Bohm 2004; Grönroos 2000; April 1999; Varney 1996; Senge 1990], there is only a limited number of surveys concerning this item until today. Most of these articles belong to the domain of relationship marketing [e.g. Ballantyne 2004; Grönroos, 2004], but there are also some studies in interactive marketing [e.g. Day 1998], from a social point of view [April 1999; Gerard and Teurfs 1997] and recent in association with the service-dominant logic [e.g. Ballantyne and Varey 2006]. However, a generally accepted definition of dialog as well as a systematical description of the main characteristics is still missing. Table 1 gives an overview of the definitions used in the literature.

Table 1: *Overview of definitions of dialog used in the literature*

Source	Definition
Ballantyne 2004, p. 114	"[…] as an interactive process of learning together."
Grönroos 2000, p. 6	"A dialogue can be seen as an interactive process of reasoning together so that a common knowledge platform is developing."
April 1999, p. 231	"[…] a skill that builds critical and independent thinking, openness, and insight."
Kunoe 1998, p. 1127	"We have established the following working definition of "the core of dialogue": The degree of mutual understanding between the communicating person and their individual and united ability and will to communicate their understanding in an individualized development process."
Varney 1996, p. 31	"Dialogue is referred to here, not in the ordinary sense of a conversation, but in a specific sense, […] which uses particular methods by which a group can participate in a pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change."
Schleuning 1995, p. 49	"The Dialog is based on an interactive exchange between the company and customers. Whereby both parties have the possibility to influence one another by taking the activities of the others into account and switching from the role of the recipient to sender et vice versa."

In combining relevant aspects of these definitions, we devise the following working definition: *Dialog is an interactive process of learning together between emancipated partners, so that common knowledge is exchanged, new knowledge is generated and relationship knowledge is developed.*

From this definition, the following characteristics can be derived. First of all, a dialog holds *process* character and hence consists of a sequence of activities. Another characteristic of dialog relates to its *interactive* nature, what in general indicates any action causing a reaction [Ballantyne 2004, p. 114]. More concrete, interaction can be defined as specific dyadic activities through which the participants can influence each other directly [Lindberg-Repo and Grönroos 2004, p. 231]. Consequently, a dialog only accomplishes by listening and communication taken place between participants [Lindberg-Repo and Grönroos 2004, p. 234]. Thereby a dialog can lead to common agreement and an understanding of each other´s point of view, although the parties have recognized and accepted different interpretations of an issue or problem. This is also possible, because assumptions and prejudices of participants are checked and confronted with each other during the interaction [Ballantyne and Varey 2006, p. 230] and additionally due to the creative disruption of taken-for-sure and implicit assumptions, which often act as constraints for extending the level of commitment, trust and satisfaction [Ballantyne and Varey 2006, p. 230]. This common agreement and understanding of each other's point is a kind of relationship specific knowledge that affects perceived relationship value as well as perceived integration value.

Moreover, *learning together* is another attribute of dialog. During dialog, a company and its customers continuously learn from each other. The company gets a deeper understanding of the customer´s needs, value, usage habits and internal processes. In return, customers learn how to participate in the interaction process in order to enhance the exchange of information, support, quality of solutions, etc. [Grönroos 2000, p. 11]. Additionally needs, issues, problems or decisions to be made are investigated jointly and thus dialog supports the finding of intelligent solutions to problems which seemed to be unsolvable so far. Furthermore, the participants of a dialog are *emancipated*. It has to be critical for both company and customers to be contributing ideas as well as jointly discussing the issues and ideas to focus on [Jaworski and Kohli 2006, p. 113]. Thereby the traditional sender-receiver model is not appropriate and has to

be replaced by a two way communication form in which the parties are seen as partners. This learning together and co-creating of solutions is first of all a driver of perceived effective benefits and perceived individualization benefits.

In addition, a dialog is characterized by an *increase in the level of knowledge* for both the provider and the customer. A dialog is a two way mode of communication, which supports the continuously exchange of information *between* company and customers, so that a common knowledge platform can be built [Gummesson 2002, p. 166; Grönroos 2000, p. 6]. In the ongoing relationship, company and customer can both use this knowledge. As dialog entails the continuously exchange of implicit and explicit knowledge between the participants, an increase in understanding and sharing of meanings can also be reached and relationship specific knowledge can be enhanced [Ballantyne 2004, pp. 119], which indirectly influences trust and the generation of knowledge in ways that haven't been noticed so far. That is new knowledge can also be generated in the course of dialog [Gummesson 2002, p. 166; Grönroos 2000, p. 6]. The generation of common knowledge, of new knowledge and the development of relationship specific knowledge and trust contribute to the perceived value of customer solutions as all dimensions of the construct will be enhanced.

The term dialog has to be strictly distinguished from the related term discussion. As it has been said above, a dialog primarily aims to achieve a deeper level of understanding between the parties involved. In contrast, a discussion is more concerned with the exchange of opinions [Ballantyne 2004, pp. 116]. Here, different views are presented and defended with the ambition to establish oneself. Contrary to that, a dialog is characterized by a free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues through listening to each another [Senge 1990, p. 237]. Accordingly, in dialog participants speak between each other and not to each other [Ballantyne 2006, p. 227]. Subjected to parties involved into the dialog, two forms can be differentiated. Possible types of dialog are internal and external dialog [Ballantyne 2004, p. 121]. Internal dialog describes a dialog between a company and its employees, whereas the term external dialog indicates a dialog between a company and its customers.

To summarize: Dialog is a form of communicative interaction that affects the dimensions of perceived customer value of solutions in various ways, because this interactive process of learning together leads to an improved understanding of each other point's of view, creates mutual agreements and generates different kinds of knowledge that are necessary to co-create high valued customer solutions and additionally supports the incremental development of trust and commitment and thus also enhances perceived relationship value.

4. Development of a management framework for dialog: Short outlook on future research

Dialog has been discussed as a form of communicative interaction that is a driver of customers' value perceptions of customer solutions. But we have to point out clearly that dialog brings opportunities for enhancing perceived value of customer solutions, whether they can be realized depends on several conditions. Future research on the management of dialog must first of all systematically identify conditions for a successful dialog between customers and suppliers of customer solutions. There are already some hints in literature concerning these conditions which can be taken as a starting point: It has for example been argued that both parties must be motivated to develop and maintain a dialog [Grönroos 2000, p. 11], that a dialog requires the participants to agree to some guidelines [Varney 1996, p. 31] or "rules of engagement" [Jaworski and Kohli, p. 11], that there may be structural organizational barriers to dialog in both companies and that the dialogical capability of persons as well as of groups both have to be assessed and often to be improved [Ballantyne 2004, p. 118].

Moreover future research on the management of dialog has to investigate, how a dialog can take place in planned interaction processes, but it also has to be explored, whether it is useful and how it is possible to shape communication instruments in a dialog form [Grönroos 2000, pp. 7]. This approach is especially appropriated for instruments which are characterized by a personal contact between company and customer, such as personal selling, counseling interviews at trade shows, customer interaction center, etc. But it seems also possible to create a dialog within impersonal media, if the instruments are used in a two-way communication mode and if an ongoing exchange of opinions between participants and the building up of a common meaning can be realized. Accordingly the integration of dialog into the planning and implementation of the communication strategy of a customer solutions provider including the coordination of different communication tools is another topic for future research concerning the management of dialog.

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