Measures and measurement: process and practice

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Abstract

Even although case studies remain one of the most widely utilised approaches in the study of industrial markets, debate continues about the apparent lack of any consistency in the way the case study method is applied. While acknowledging the shortcomings, this paper highlights the strengths and celebrates the diversity of the case study approach in developing and testing theory. Seven outstanding cases, selected from the Fourth Meeting of the IMP Group in Asia are presented.

Introduction

There is within the literature, an on-going debate about the strengths and weaknesses of the alternative philosophical approaches in utilising the case study methodology to analyse relationships within business-to-business markets. It was in this very journal that Dubois and Gibbert (2010) sought to capture the key aspects of the interplay between the case method, theory and empirical phenomena. While Easton (2010) avidly supported a critical realist approach, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) argued for an alternative approach that was built on moderate constructionism and abduction. Wagner, Lukassen and Mahlendorf (2010) compared and contrasted grounded theory with objective hermeneutics, Visconti (2010) pleaded for the more extensive use of ethnographic case studies in business-to-business marketing research and Borghini, Carù and Cova (2010) presented their arguments for the more widespread use of videography to capture and analyse data.

With much of the debate focusing on the validity, reliability and objectivity associated with the case study methodology, both Beverland and Lindgreen (2010) and Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki and Welch (2010) focused on the elements that contribute towards building a good case study in the industrial marketing community, while Woodside (2010) made numerous recommendations to improve the balance between accuracy, generality and complexity. Similarly in the management literature, McCutcheon and Meredith (1993), Stuart et al. (2002) and Barratt, Choi and Li (2011) offer constructive advice on how to overcome many of the criticisms often associated with the case study approach.

Elsewhere, there is a growing rift between research and practice. Not only must case study research be more rigorous, but it must also be more relevant to industry. Schiele and Krummaker (2011) describe consortium benchmarking as a collaborative case study approach that produces rigorous knowledge relevant to both groups. Under this multiple case study approach, industry practitioners are not only key informants but active co-researchers, who collectively analyse the data and propose generalizable concepts, frameworks and theories.

McCutcheon and Meredith (1993) lament the need for "researchers to gather better information about the realities of operational systems and to develop better, more complete theories about them" (p 239). Stuart et al. (2002) describe how case studies have the potential to make a "more powerful, influential and useful contribution to both management practice and theory development" (p 431). More recently, Dubois and Gibbert (2010) note that as most case studies in business-to-business marketing deal with real management situations and are typically

negotiated and carried out in close collaboration with industry practitioners, they have the potential to create knowledge that practitioners will consider useful. Johnston, Leach and Liu (1999) go as far as suggesting that the "findings from case research may have more influence on marketing managers than survey results" (p 203).

Perhaps more than any other research group, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group have actively encouraged the use of case studies to explore the manner in which firms interact in networks. From the Fourth Meeting of the IMP Group in Asia, December 2009, nine papers were considered for potential publication. However, after a rigorous peer review process, only seven were ultimately selected. While there are a number of themes running through the papers including globalisation, sense-making and identity, innovation in networks, conflict and tension, the common thread that links them all together is the use of the case study methodology. This editorial paper will briefly explore the strengths and weaknesses of the case study approach before drawing on the lessons to be learnt from the selected papers.

Strengths of the case study approach

Case studies are highly suitable for examining the decisions and behaviour of groups and individuals within organizations and inter-company relationships (Dubois and Araujo, 2004; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005), for they capture the dynamics of the studied phenomenon and provide a multi-dimensional view of the situation within a specific context (Eisenhardt, 1989). Furthermore, case studies are often used for developing new theories, for examining unfamiliar situations, or to support, expand or raise doubts about existing theories, particularly in situations where several competing theories each have the potential, under a predetermined set of conditions, to explain the observed outcome (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993).

Typically, a case study involves one or more researchers gathering a considerable volume of data from within an organization to either describe a situation or to better understand how or why events occur (Yin, 2003). The researcher(s) assess the conditions surrounding the phenomenon of interest and endeavour to build a plausible explanation or to discover a causal relationship. The data may come from primary sources, such as direct observation or in-depth interviews with the actors involved, or secondary sources including documents or records. It may examine a single situation or, with multiple case studies, several related situations (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993).

Bonoma (1985) finds case studies to be particularly useful where: (1) the phenomenon of interest cannot be easily studied outside its natural setting; (2) where the phenomenon cannot be readily quantified; and (3) where multiple variables influence organizational behaviour. Case studies also provide a suitable means of examining time-dependent relationships (Stuart et al., 2002; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Quintens and Matthyssens, 2010). As distinct from historical studies, case studies generally focus on current conditions, using historical data primarily to understand or substantiate the information gathered about an on-going situation (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993). By investigating a company's historical documents and conducting in-depth interviews, a rich description of how and why relationships develop over time can be pieced together and substantiated (Johnstone, Leach and Liu, 1999; Dubois and Gibbert, 2010).

Context

Case studies have been employed extensively in industrial marketing theory to explore a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2003). No attempt is made to isolate the phenomenon from its context, but instead, the phenomenon is of interest precisely because of its relation to its context (Johnstone, Leach and Liu, 1999 p. 203). Furthermore,

investigating on-going business operations seldom allow conditions to be controlled or variables to be manipulated. This restriction eliminates the use of controlled experiments and simulations. The researcher(s) therefore must study the phenomenon by noting all the conditions in the atmosphere that may potentially affect the outcomes (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993).

Complexity

Most case studies aim to examine complex problems in a systemic and holistic manner to explain the relationships between events and outcomes. The principal objective is to achieve a deep understanding of the actors, interactions, sentiments and behaviours as they evolve over time (Borghini, Carù and Cova, 2010). According to Easton (2010), case studies provide researcher(s) with an opportunity to tease out and disentangle a complex set of factors and relationships.

By their very nature, networks are difficult to access and complex in structure (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). As new actors, practices and processes and component subsystems are included in the analysis, the complexity makes generalizations more difficult to see and to substantiate. Within a typical firm, as its operations are affected by so many factors, there are invariably several alternative explanations for observed outcomes (Stuart et al., 2002). Consequently, this complexity can create barriers to developing well substantiated theories.

Case studies also provide a means of enabling the researcher(s) to observe and to accurately assess the impact of phenomena in different contexts (Stuart et al., 2002). As the atmosphere within a network is dynamic and constantly changing, case studies provide a means of both confirming and refuting the conditions under which theories are applicable. Since only one well-documented contrary instance can disprove a hypothesis, case studies are a very powerful tool in delimiting the generalizability of a theory or discounting it altogether (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993).

Flexibility

Researchers have employed case studies largely because the flexibility of the method suits the study of complex, evolving relationships and interactions in business-to-business markets (Dubois and Araujo, 2004). The research scope can be expanded if necessary, the focus shifted and/or additional sources of information sought as the study progresses (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993). Barratt, Choi and Li (2011) describe how data analysis needs to occur simultaneously and incrementally with data collection. Such allows the researcher(s) to not only capture the reality that the data brings, but to adjust the constructs and their relationships as additional data is collected.

However, it should not be assumed that conducting case research is either informal or casual. Properly carrying out a case study requires clearly stated goals and a sound theoretical basis, an appropriate protocol for information collection and carefully selected research sites (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993). More recently, in defining what constitutes best practice, Piekkari et al. (2010) discuss the need to: (i) decide on the key features of the case design; (ii) establish case study boundaries; (iii) employ multiple sources of evidence; and (iv) to adhere to accepted standards of validity and reliability.

The case study method is often used to investigate problems from a number of different research paradigms. The researcher may take an interpretive approach in understanding and explaining the data or a more positivist approach, relying to some extent on objective measurement instruments (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993). Easton (2010) suggests that one of the great strengths of the case study approach is the ability to employ both deductive and inductive data

collection approaches. The deductive approach helps identify the phenomenon of interest, suggests what mechanisms may be involved and provides links to previous research results and the literature. On the other hand, induction provides event data which demand explanation and potentially tests the explanations. Combining more than one approach can be especially fruitful in increasing researchers' deductive efforts. According to Woodside (2010), in the field of industrial marketing management, a general theory is built from dynamically combining multiple steps of induction and deduction that often involves re-interviewing and revision. According to Dubois and Gadde (2002), the notion of travelling "back and forth" between theory and empirical phenomenon is a recurring theme in the case study methodology.

Multiplicity

Data for the preparation of case studies can be collected by multiple means including qualitative research techniques such as interviews, document analysis, various modes of observation and the use of quantitative data (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). In most cases, observations and interviews are supplemented with documents, historical records, organization charts, production statistics and other sources of information (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993). The use of multiple data sources is not only consistent with the ethnographic data gathering approach and concepts of triangulation (Stuart et al., 2002), but as multiple data sources potentially improve the reliability of the data, to the stronger substantiation of constructs and propositions (Barratt et al., 2011).

While one of the great strengths of the case research methodology is its ability to utilize various sources of evidence and triangulation procedures to demonstrate convergence, Johnstone et al. (1999) warn about universally accepting internal documentation, for in many cases, it may have been edited to reflect a more desirable image. Similarly, while external documents are generally considered to be more objective, the evidence presented may be coloured by the author(s) individual perspectives and interpretations (Loo and Lowe, 2011).

Another strength of the case study approach is its ability to accommodate multiple informants (Johnstone et al., 1999). As the study of business networks invariably involves a myriad of actors, case studies provide an opportunity to capture the dynamics of the relationships from multiple perspectives. However, as multiple informants generally have different views on the phenomenon of interest, analysing the data, synthesizing what has been learned and determining how best to present the material may take a great deal of time and effort (Stuart et al., 2002). Fortuitously, there are a great many techniques available to summarize or characterize the mass of material that a case study can generate (McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993) and despite its age, Miles and Huberman (1984) provide what is still regarded as one of the best approaches for the analysis of qualitative data.

Depending on the purposes for which the case study is being conducted, from the outset, researcher(s) must decide whether a single or multiple case study design is appropriate. Barratt et al. (2011) suggest that the fewer the number of cases, the greater the opportunity for a more in-depth observation. However, multiple cases will not only augment external validity and help guard against observer bias, but are more likely to lead to more robust and testable theory. Yin (2003) suggests that when selecting multiple cases, each case must be chosen to complement others. Each case must be carefully selected so that it either predicts similar results or produces contrasting results, for predictable reasons. However, Dubois and Araujo (2007) argue that it is not always possible to know in advance how relevant an individual case may be. Some cases may be selected because they provide exemplary examples which may encourage greater readership and the greater adoption of key lessons by organisations.

Multiplicity may also manifest itself in the form of multiple investigators. While the use of multiple investigators enables the workload to be distributed among individual researcher(s) (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005), it may also lead to a better ability to handle the richness of the contextual data and provide more confidence in the research results (Barratt et al., 2011). Eisenhardt (1989) lists a number of strategies that can be used with multiple researchers to improve the validity and enable fresh insights to be brought into the analysis at different points.

Time

Despite the challenges associated with its analysis, case studies provide one of the most appropriate ways for evaluating time-based events (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). Through single or multiple longitudinal case studies, it is possible to evaluate the impact of a turbulent and dynamic environment on the network. More recently, Quintens and Matthyssens (2010) describe how case studies can be dramatically enriched by the inclusion of the process dimensions of time (duration, timing, frequency, pace and order).

Case study constraints

Despite the widespread acceptability of the case study methodology, in many academic circles the approach is often criticised for its lack of rigour (Barratt et al., 2011; Dubois and Gibbert, 2010), validity (Borghini et al., 2010; Dubois and Gibbert, 2010) and limited generalizability (Easton, 2010; Schiele and Krummaker, 2011). The key constraint it seems is the low statistical representativeness. However, Stuart et al. (2002), Beverland and Lindgreen (2010), Borghini et al. (2010) and Schiele and Krummaker (2011) also allude to inappropriate practices and the way in which case studies are often executed. All too often there is a marked preference for one type of design (single or multiple) and one theoretical paradigm and yet, it is the very lack of any rigid, predetermined approach that provides one of the greatest strengths of the case study approach.

Validity

One of the major criticisms of case-based research is the lack of rigour. Much of this is derived from the apparent failure of the approach to be recognised as a proper scientific methodology (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Most of the core arguments focus on the problems of theory building, validity and the process of data analysis (Borghini et al., 2010). According to Barratt et al. (2011), many of these criticisms simply arise from the lack of familiarity with qualitative research methods, where the primary concern is the amount of freedom researcher(s) have to formulate hypotheses, the natural inclination to peek into the data and/or to selectively look at evidence that supports *a priori* stated hypotheses.

To overcome these objections, Johnstone et al. (1999) advocates the use of systematic multiple case study research designs and the use of multiple independent evaluation techniques to assess potential bias and to ensure methodological rigour. In a similar manner, Yin (2003) establishes four tests to evaluate a case research design: (i) construct validity, (ii) internal validity, (iii) external validity and (iv) reliability.

Construct validity

Achieving construct validity means operationalizing the units of analysis from which the data is collected and establishing robust measures to avoid making subjective judgements (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010).

By their very nature, Johnstone et al. (1999) acknowledge that case studies are subject to potential researcher bias at any stage of the research process. Every good case study must begin with theory. However, even at this first stage, Stuart et al. (2002) identify a major weakness among some case study researchers who presume that an applicable theory does not exist. All research starts from an examination of existing theory, even where the body of knowledge is poorly developed. In many cases, with an appropriate search of the literature, relevant theory may be found to reside in another discipline.

In unfamiliar situations or situations for which there is limited theory, a fairly tight theoretical framework is needed *a priori* to make case comparisons possible (Johnstone et al., 1999). A strong theoretical framework guides the conduct of the study, helps select the cases and also limits the number of theoretical dimensions to be considered. Without the guidance of theory, researchers may easily become lost in the complexity of real-life events (Halinen and Törnroos, 1995). The failure to state theory *a priori* and to generalize to theory and other contexts is a telling weakness of case study research (Woodside, 2010).

Even at this first stage of theory development, the researcher(s) prior research and past experience, culture and belief systems will implicitly influence their interpretations and judgments (Stuart et al., 2002). In a similar manner, Dubois and Araujo (2004) recognise that the choice of methodology cannot be divorced from theoretical positions, nor can theories be regarded as method-neutral (p. 9). Eisenhardt (1989) points out that a "clean theoretical slate" is extremely unlikely, since the research purpose, site selection and information gathering process require some rationale, indicative of some theoretical basis. In such situations, most researchers will inevitably develop context-bound knowledge and explanations which are closely related to their experiences and their chosen research methods (Loo and Lowe, 2011).

In most cases, case study researchers utilize a theoretical or biased sampling approach where cases are chosen for theoretical reasons (Eisenhardt, 1989). Cases are chosen to complement each other, to replicate the findings under different conditions, or to specifically investigate rival hypotheses (Johnston et al., 1999). However, bounded rationality and the high costs associated with case research may lead researcher(s) to seek out easy-to-access but potentially sub-optimal research sites (Stuart et al., 2002). In other instances, lead firms may be selected in the belief that reviewers will see the information presented in the case as more worthy of publication.

Internal validity

Internal validity is concerned with how the researcher(s) establish or infer some causal link between two events (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). While construct validity is considered during the data collection phase, internal validity refers to the data analysis phase.

In the process of data collection and interpretation, findings are expected to be supported by the data, to be non-prejudiced and non-judgmental (Johnstone et al. 1999). However, Stuart et al. (2002) recognise that the manner in which researcher(s) articulate what they have observed will be shaped by their prior experience and background, prior scientific training, culture and belief systems. Loo and Lowe (2011) suggest that special attention needs to be given by the researcher to the subjective meanings that people attach to things. There is a need to recognize that researcher(s), often unwittingly, make many assumptions that influence their interpretations of the interviews and the case story presented. Researchers are not neutral and as most do not have sufficient insight to overcome the ambiguities they typically encounter in the data collection process, case research outcomes will always reflect an element of subjectivity.

For Wagner, Lukassen and Mahlendorf (2010), internal validity is not dissimilar to credibility: are the results obtained believable from the perspective of the subjects under investigation? Do

the developed theories adequately reflect and explain the mental models of the subjects? Are there alternative explanations? Primarily through pattern matching and triangulation, researcher(s) seek to verify their findings by seeking convergence from multiple data sources and informants (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). However, when the evidence from one case conflicts or disconfirms the research hypotheses, this evidence must be evaluated and its impact fully assessed (Johnstone et al., 1999).

In very complex situations, more so where there are a limited number of cases, McCutcheon and Meredith (1993) find that there is a greater likelihood of researcher(s) deducing inappropriate causal relationships. Woodside (2010) reports that triangulation is both expensive and time consuming because it involves re-interviewing the same and new informants. Other researcher(s) may choose to use multiple researchers to interpret qualitative data, to subject their findings to an outside auditor or to facilitate group discussions with key informants (Johnstone et al., 1999). However, such activities may undermine the confidential nature of the responses.

External validity

Case studies are often criticised for lacking generalizability. External validity, or generalizability, is grounded in the intuitive belief that theories must be able to account for phenomena not only in the setting in which they have been studied, but also in other settings (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010).

One of the most persistent claims against case-based research is the assertion that the number of cases is too small to allow the results to be generalized (Stuart et al., 2002). However, whereas survey research relies on statistical generalization, case studies rely on analytical generalization (Yin, 2003). For case study research, the objective is to generalize from each case to the extent theory, rather than to generalize to a population (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010).

While Eisenhardt (1989) addresses this concern through the use of multiple case analyses, Halinen and Törnroos (2005) express their concerns at the apparent undermining of the contribution that single case studies can potentially make to theory. Similarly, Beverland and Lindgreen (2010) lament how the richness of individual cases is being lost in favour of saturation. Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) comment on how neglecting single case studies increases the risk of overlooking important features of the studied phenomenon and the complex network environment within which the relationships are embedded, leading to a shallow and distorted view of the interactions.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the absence of random error (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). Fundamentally, reliability is the extent to which a study can be repeated by subsequent researchers, who by duplicating the process, are expected to find similar results (Stuart et al., 2002). However, if similar results are to be achieved, researchers must follow a similar methodology. As Barratt et al. (2011), Beverland and Lindgreen (2010) and Piekkari et al. (2010) report, the majority of published case studies provide insufficient details about how the study was framed, how the data was collected and how the analysis was conducted. Not only does this limit transparency, which makes it very difficult to make an informed judgment about the study's validity, but potentially, the ability to replicate the study may be compromised. The problem is accentuated by the diversity of case quality, the widespread proliferation of inappropriate practices and the researcher(s) epistemological approach (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010). Furthermore, Wagner et al. (2010) draw attention to the problem of time, for interactions in industrial markets take place within a turbulent and dynamic market which is constantly changing.

From the positivist paradigm, unless the results are reliable, the research results have limited validity. However, from a constructivist perspective, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) argue that the validity of case research should be determined by whether: (i) its truth claims are supported by the data; (ii) the claims, data and the chain of arguments which link them together are acceptable to the scientific community; and (iii) the scientific community that determines the study's validity observes the norms of criticism, the uptake of criticism, maintaining standards, fairness and equality. Valid research should raise the level of awareness of the participants and the public about the knowledge produced by the research and should encourage action.

For Piekarri et al. (2010), there is not a straightforward relationship between a research community's methodological standards and its methodologies-in-use. Good case research is ultimately tied to the researcher(s) epistemological and philosophical perspectives, so that, in the context of business-to-business marketing, there is no universally accepted best practice. Rather than to prescribe a single set of standards, Piekarri et al. (2010) and Beverland and Lindgreen (2010) celebrate the diversity, for it provides researchers with a number of alternate approaches to develop and test theory. Both McCutcheon and Meredith (1993) and Schiele and Krummaker (2011) note that should case studies be restricted to a single theoretical paradigm and a single method, there is a very real possibility of neglecting important phenomena.

To the cases

Lowe, Purchase and Ellis (this issue) get this special issue underway by challenging the very foundations upon which the modern IMP Group has been foundered: the interaction between actors, activities and resources. Drawing upon Goffman's (1956, 1961) dramaturgical approach, they explore the roles played by the various actors and the many props (resources) that they utilise in their desire to create a favourable impression (identity). For Lowe et al., the interaction between firms can be viewed as a performance, shaped by the actors desire to create an impression that corresponds with their desired goals, the environment (or stage) upon which the interaction takes place and the manner in which the audience (the network) responds. Actors may not only take on multiple roles, but these roles can also change in different situations and indeed on different stages. Utilising the case developed by Helander and Möller (2007; 2008a; 2008b), they illustrate the importance of creating a favourable impression and of communicating that impression to the network in manner that does not compromise their network position. This case was chosen because of the extent of published information, the focus on the roles played by the organizations, the inclusion of critical events highlighting the drama and the extended time period over which the case was discussed. Dubois and Araujo (2007) strongly support the multiple use of such exemplary "classic" cases and their subsequent re-interpretation based on alternative theories.

Through a discursive approach, Ellis, Rod, Beal and Lindsay (this issue) endeavour to enhance our understanding of the way in which Indian managers seek not only to create their own personal identity, but how they seek also to enhance the perceived attractiveness of their firm and their country. Recognising that the majority of business-to-business marketing research has been conducted within a Western context, to overcome cultural nuances, Ellis et al. endeavour to capture the actors own views of the network within which they are embedded through analysing the language managers use to legitimise their positions. Utilising the concept of an 'interpretive repertoire', the words, metaphors, figures of speech and grammar that were used by the 23 participants in the study to describe their relationships with trading partners were examined using the NVivo software. Not unexpectedly, with the increasing desire to do business in a global marketplace, there is some evidence of the tension between the desire to conform to traditional cultural beliefs and norms and the need to conform to the expected management philosophies of Western business partners.

Lundberg and Andresen (this issue) and Munksgaard, Clarke, Storvang and Erichsen (this issue) also find themselves grappling with the conflict and tension in relationships that are so often associated with collaborative research and development activities. For Lundberg and Andresen, conflict emerges between the need for universities to provide open access to information, infrastructure and expertise for the public good and yet, when they engage in new product development and innovation, to maintain commercial confidentiality. Similarly for government, the costs and risks associated with new product innovation need to be offset by the desire to facilitate regional development and improve competitiveness. For business, even although most firms recognize the need for continuous innovation and new product development, the time that it takes to bring a new product to market, the significant costs associated with the launch and the high risk often results in a significant underinvestment in R&D expenditure.

Despite their different motives, through a case study of the Processum Biorefinery Initiative AB, Lundberg and Andresen demonstrate how collaboration between private enterprise, government and a university enabled the consortium to secure sufficient funds to successfully develop and patent several innovative products and processes. Instrumental to the success of the consortium was the initial disposition of the partners towards cooperation. Having previously worked together, the initiators had developed confidence in each other's competence and trustworthiness. Social capital not only facilitated communication and negotiation, but encouraged implicit standards and norms of cooperative behaviour.

For Munksgaard et al., the challenge associated with innovation is how to balance the multiple needs and requirements of exchange partners. Recognising that firms are embedded within networks, the introduction of new ideas, products and processes will have a direct impact on the firm's relationships with upstream suppliers and downstream customers. The willingness of these exchange partners to adjust or to adapt to the interventions is largely dependent on their perceptions of value and the extent to which these interventions are consistent with the institutionalised practices within the network. Conflict will arise when interventions proposed are incompatible with the network activities or exchange partners perceive that the incentives offered are insufficient commensurate with the effort or investment required.

Through three case studies, Muksgaard et al. demonstrate how one exchange partners desire to hold onto sensitive market information not only stifled attempts by the focal company to develop new product ideas and new product variants for their downstream customers, but also damaged its relationship with that exchange partner. In the second case, the successful adoption of the innovation is dependent upon two independent networks learning how to work together. As the different actors each have different aims, rather than colliding, these different aspirations contribute to the success of the project. Rather than there being one dominant actor, each of the actors has a unique competency that enables them to become leaders in their own field. In the third case, the focal actor did not have sufficient influence to change the network processes or network structure. As the company was unable to find partners with complementary or joint strategic intentions for new product development, no innovative outcome was achieved.

Bygballe, Bø and Grønland (this issue) continue with the themes of conflict and collaboration in their exploration of four alternative international distribution systems. For the focal firm, a large discount retail chain in Norway, the challenge is to find the most effective way of reducing the total costs of purchasing off-shore, managing transport and inventory through a third party logistics provider, while maintaining an exceptional level of customer service and agility. Their results reveal the importance of coordinating the various actors' activities and resources to generate the desired efficiencies in terms of the appropriate flow of goods, cost effectiveness and customer service.

Bairstow and Young (this issue) combine expert interviews with a wealth of trade publications to explore the conflict and evolution of IT distribution systems in Australia. While four factors: market conditions, the product, the nature of the commercial arrangement (contract) and the influence factors are shown to shape the development of distribution channels, it is the manner in which Bairstow and Young have approached the problem which is of most interest. Using narrative event analysis (Abell, 1987; Reisman, 1993), Bairstow and Young demonstrate how the timing, order and interaction of events influence the actors choice of strategy, roles and functions. Central to the channel's co-evolution was the changing nature, the growing amount and continuing impact of conflict between the channel actors, instituted, in part, by dramatic shifts in products, technology and industry rationalisation.

Finally and perhaps most fitting, Havila and Medlin (this issue) discuss ending competence in business closure. While Ford (1980) and Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) were among the first to recognise that long-term relationships change over time, the manner in which firms go about terminating their relationships with exchange partners will influence for some time the way in which other exchange partners and stakeholders interact with the focal firm. Through a case study of the Australian automotive industry, Havila and Medlin demonstrate how the timing, prior experience and understanding of the different types of commitment and interdependencies enabled the focal firm to exit without damaging its brand reputation.

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