

Are We Any Closer To Understanding What Is Meant By Market Orientation ?

Marie Ashwin and Alan Hirst

This paper presents a review of the concept of market orientation and seeks to clarify current thinking. It identifies the key discussions within the development of this area and evaluates their contribution. The theory identifies a number of alternative definitions and approaches which are often complementary but sometimes contradictory. Whatever their perspective the discussions cover a range of organisational activities focusing upon the measurement of performance. These differing views appear to fall between the areas of management and marketing. The conclusions lead to a number of implications for future research. We recommend that future research considers the internal communication processes in terms of the reception, understanding and acceptance of the message before moving on to address the interfunctional coordination. This would provide empirical data to evaluate both the individual and organisational ability to implement the concept of market orientation.

Field of Research: Market Orientation, Organisational Performance, Strategic Management

1. Introduction

As far back as 1990, as the concept of market orientation gained importance in the discussion of organisational performance, Kohli and Jaworski identified confusion in the literature in terms of defining the concept. The majority of papers in the subsequent decade focussed upon market orientation in terms of customer satisfaction and employee performance, as a means to measure organisational performance (Deng and Dart, 1994; Deshpandé, Farley and Webster, 1993; Webster, 1993; Pelham and Wilson, 1996; Becker and Homburg, 1999). The start of the 21st century saw the discussion of implementation of a market orientation develop as it incorporated the concepts of stakeholder theory (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004) and organisational culture as one of the key variables which drives market-oriented behaviour (Homburg and Pflesser, 2000).

Dr Marie Ashwin, Business School, University of Hertfordshire email: m.ashwin@herts.ac.uk
Dr Alan Hirst, BCIM, London SouthBank University email: hirsta@lsbu.ac.uk

Gotteland et al confirmed in a contemporary paper that two areas remain under-explored, a definition of the concept, and its implementation (2007). They proposed an integration of the existing theoretical approaches which, in their opinion, were still 'few in number' (2007, p.45). With this in mind this paper sets out to draw together the various strands of the literature, using as a guide the two key approaches, being market-driven, or driving the market. The focus of this paper has purposely avoided the concept of internal market orientation which is fundamental to any organisational response to customer needs.

2. The Concept Of Market Orientation

This conceptual paper examines existing theory on market orientation to locate the various models and definitions. The various discussions around the approaches will be outlined. Whilst seeking to define 'market orientation' it is essential to acknowledge the confusion identified by Kohli and Jaworski (1990) in the literature with regards to the failure to distinguish between the marketing concept and the organisational activities required to successfully implement such a business philosophy. In an attempt to move towards a resolution of the confusion within this paper the definition developed by Deng and Dart has been adopted:

'Market orientation – the generation of appropriate marketing intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, and the relative abilities of competitive entities to satisfy these needs; the integration and dissemination of such intelligence across departments; and the coordinated design and execution of the organization's strategic response to market opportunities'(1994, p.726).

Day highlighted further confusion and inconsistency in the understanding of the term 'market-driven' and made the basic proposition that a robust market orientation:

'... can enhance the effectiveness of any strategy, and serve as one of the few sustainable sources of advantage left in an environment of rapid technological change and aggressive competitive imitation and leap-frogging of strategies' (1998, p.2).

He also stated that no organisation would fulfil its full potential if it did not possess superior skills in understanding, satisfying and retaining its customers. His article also outlined an organisational typology which identified three main orientations which he considered 'myopic'. He categorised these orientations as the self-centred, the customer-compelled and the sceptical organisation. In 1994 Hamel and Prahalad led the argument which voiced the opinion that customers should not be held as the major source of market information about what the customer wants as they were unable to envision products and services which had no precedent. They were supported in this view by Martin and Faircloth (1995) who saw market research activities such as surveys and focus groups as a distraction from the real work of the organisation, stating moreover that they resulted in safe, bland new offerings.

His conclusions suggested a deeper meaning, with a 'market-driven' organisation having a superior ability to understand its valuable customers, enabling it to attract and retain them. In this paper superior was defined as the ability to outperform

competitors. Both approaches, whether market-driven or driving the market, are focused upon the customer, competition and market conditions. Esteban et al. (2002) made the distinction that the former means understanding and reacting appropriately to the preferences and behaviour of those involved in a given market structure. The implication of driving markets is that the organisation will influence market structure and/or the behaviour of its participants, in order to obtain competitive advantage. The reactive behaviour, identified by Slater and Narver (1994, 1995, 1998) as being responsive and 'customer led', and by Day (1999a) as being compelled by the wishes of the customer, requires the organisation to find out what will satisfy these wishes and understand how to deliver something that meets that need. Taking a proactive approach, whilst discussed in some detail by Narver and Slater (1990) and Kohli et al. (1993) as the way in which a company needs to identify and understand the latent needs of customers, and potential customers, has only recently been researched in any depth, with the focus upon the relationship between market orientation and organisational performance (Narver, Slater and MacLachlan, 2004).

The views of Cervera et al. (2001) which supported the findings of research by Siguaw and Diamantopoulos (1995, 1997, 1998) and other research which further tested the concept of market orientation in different economic, political and cultural fields (Wood and Bhuian, 1993; Selnes et al., 1996) agreed that the generation, dissemination and response to market intelligence to satisfy the needs of the market 'constitutes the nuclear essence of a market orientation' (Cervera et al., 2001, p.1263) in all areas of activity, whether in the for profit, not for profit, private or public field. From this premise a review of the numerous approaches to the concept of market orientation sets out to identify the major themes. Personal, organisational and environmental antecedents as well as the resultant consequences of a market orientation will be discussed briefly to map the domain. The importance of a market orientation was emphasised by Denison and McDonald (1995) in their review of the state of marketing in the UK. However despite agreement that a market orientation is desirable by academics, a translation of that into workable constructs for practitioners is less evident (Harris, 1996a, 1996b, 2003; Harris and Piercy, 1997). Agarwal et al. stated simply that the popular understanding of the term market orientation was 'an indicator of the extent to which a firm implements the "marketing concept"' (2003, p.68). The term 'market orientation' has been used throughout the discussion in this document in preference to other phrases such as marketing orientation in accordance with the view of Kohli and Jaworski (1990) that it emphasises the holistic coordination and cooperation within organisations, avoids political undertones and has a broader focus.

3. Approaches To Market Orientation

Tuominen and Möller (1996) identified four main approaches to market orientation as: enterprise philosophy, market information process, coordination of market information, and the learning source of the organisation. Esteban et al. (2002) outlined the five dimensions generally accepted as the core of market orientation: customer orientation, competitor orientation, supplier-dealer orientation, environment orientation and interfunctional coordination. There has been much discussion amongst both academics and practitioners (See Deshpandé, 1999; Wilkinson, 2001) with much support for the view that market-oriented organisations show greater

innovation and corporate success (Deshpandé et al., 1993; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Narver and Slater, 1990; Pelham and Wilson, 1996). Research originally in product-specific areas has more recently been extended to include the service sector by authors such as Cheng and Chan (1998) and Van Egeren and O'Connor (1998). In 1999 Becker and Homburg reviewed the literature and identified three distinct conceptual views, the behavioural, cultural and system-based perspectives.

There is, however, broad agreement that market orientation as a philosophy consists of three core aspects (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Kotler, 1991): customer orientation, the integration of effort, and the identification of organisational objectives. Furthermore the definition of market intelligence is extended beyond information gathered from the customer and competitors to include other 'exogenous market factors' such as regulation that affects both current and future customer needs. A guest editorial by Brendan Gray and Graham Hooley in a special issue of the *European Journal of Marketing* in 2002 dedicated to market orientation acknowledged the difficulty of defining the concept and asked:

'is it merely the management of marketing behaviours associated with implementing the marketing concept? Or is it a slightly broader philosophy which focuses on customers and competitors: Is it a more strategic marketing/management approach with prescribed behaviours such as scanning the market for information on customer needs and competitor actions and responding to market changes in a rapid and (hopefully) profitable manner' (p.981)?

Jaworski et al. (2000) agreed that two complementary approaches to market orientation exist, the traditional approach being market driven and the modern proactive approach driving markets. The two main contributions to the concept of market orientation which led to later studies both took a behavioural perspective (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990, 1993; Narver and Slater, 1990). Kohli and Jaworski investigated market orientation in terms of scanning the market, sharing information and responding to that information. They focused upon activities within the organisations to produce a behavioural perspective, defining market orientation as:

'... the organisation-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, dissemination of the intelligence across departments and organisation-wide responsiveness to it' (1990, p.6).

The focus of their research was upon the information-related behaviours within an organisation, an approach later used by Deng and Dart (1994). In their organisational culture-based work Narver and Slater (1990) looked at three behavioural components – customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination.

(Figure 1)

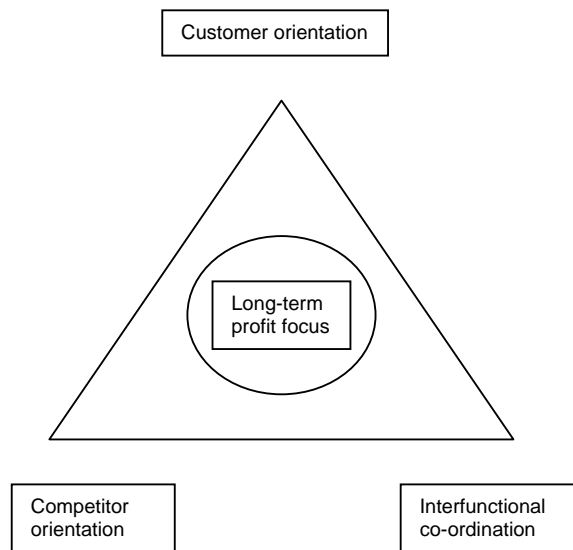


Figure 1 : Dimensions of market orientation
Source : Narver and Slater, (1990:23)

This perspective has been criticised (Gabel, 1995; Oczkowski and Farrell, 1997) on the grounds that inconsistent conceptualization of marketing and market orientation restricts the scope of the latter (Cervera et al., 2001). Furthermore they identified that the scale did not include the perceptions of consumers and intermediaries leading to questions about the reliability and validity of the concept. When discussing customer orientation which they saw as synonymous with market orientation, Deshpandé et al. suggested that it was:

‘... the set of beliefs that puts the customer’s interest first, while not excluding those of all other stakeholders such as owners, managers, and employees, in order to develop a long-term profitability enterprise’ (1993, p.27).

This develops a cognitive dimension to the approach focusing upon organizational culture. The four factors developed by Deng and Dart (1994) to measure market orientation derived from data collected from interviews with business executives as well as drawing upon existing literature. The first of the four factors, Customer Orientation, refers to the extent to which an organisation adopts behaviours aimed at ‘increasing long-term customer satisfaction’. An understanding of the capabilities of current and potential competitors to serve the same market was the second, Competitor Orientation. The third dimension, Interfunctional Coordination, recognised the importance of all parts of an organisation accepting responsibility for ‘servicing the market’. Regardless of organisational structures and processes the need to share information and coordinate effort was considered essential. The final factor in their model was that of Profit Orientation, despite arguments in the literature that profits result from the adoption of the marketing concept rather than being a behavioural component of market orientation (Levitt, 1969; Narver and Slater, 1990).

In 1999 Becker and Homburg took a systems-based perspective to address what they identified as a 'missing discussion about management related issues related to market-orientation' (in Helfert et al., 2002, p.1120), specifically the processing of market information. They conceptualised market-oriented management in terms of:

'... the degree to which management systems are designed in such a way as to promote a business organisation's orientation towards its customers and competitors' (Becker and Homburg, 1999, p.18).

Within their approach they divided the management system into five sub-systems: organization, information, planning, controlling and the human resource system.

4. Discussion

It can be seen that the perspectives fall into two general areas of interest: organizational culture and information processing. The views of both Kohli and Jaworski (1990, 1993) and Narver and Slater (1990) agree that market orientation is a continuum rather than a concept with a dichotomous either/or structure. Cadogan and Diamantopoulos (1995) compared the models and concluded that they should be considered as complementary, not mutually exclusive. Taking an organizational culture perspective the Japanese study by Deshpandé et al. (1993) associated a market culture with best performance, followed by adhocracy, clan and hierarchical cultures. A further study of five countries (France, Germany, Japan, the UK and USA) confirmed the first place ranking of market culture, but showed the clan culture moved into final place. In later research they identified innovativeness as the key variable to explain differences in performance, followed by organizational culture and climate (Deshpandé et al., 1997).

Day (1999b) however argued that an adhocracy was the most appropriate culture for a market oriented organization as it is flexible and adaptable 'whilst maintaining a primary focus on the external environment' (p.54). A market culture on the other hand emphasised competitiveness and achievement of objectives as well as productivity and market mechanisms. Deng and Dart (1994) developed an instrument to measure market orientation as a response to their discovery that no previously-published research had presented a comprehensive set of measures. This instrument incorporated the critical factors associated with the concept in order to produce a valid and reliable tool for measurement of market orientation across a broad range of organisations. Few studies in the last century focused upon market orientation and services (Siguaw et al., 1997; Lado et al., 1998; Simpson et al., 1999). An empirical study of the insurance industries in Belgium and Spain (Lado et al., 1998) concluded that although there were many similarities in the way market orientation was measured across all organizations examines, same country specific market situations were also evident. This supported Day's (1999) view that the broad categories of service providers could themselves hide the 'cultural uniqueness' (Kasper, 2002) of individual organizations.

In his discussions of the capabilities of market-driven organizations Day (1994a, 1999a, 1999b) identified market sensing, market relating and strategic thinking as fundamental and very operational aspects of the defining and implementing of a market-orientation. He found these capabilities and conditions to be linked

particularly to the openness of the organizational culture, in the way it was orientated to the external market; the relevance of the role model as identified in the CEO; the clarity of vision, strategy and structure; excellent information systems and the appreciation of employees as very important assets. Siguaw et al. (1998) examined the inter-organisational relationships between suppliers and distributors within what they termed 'dyads' particularly in terms of market orientation and channel relationship elements. Reviewing the literature Lafferty and Hult (2001) extended the central focus of market orientation beyond structures and processes (both formal and informal) to include the basic values which determine the way in which people behave, or do things, within an organization.

Kasper posited that just as organizations evidence sector-specific cultures, (Fombrum, 1984; Hofstede, 1991) so too might market orientation have sector specific attributes. As services are fundamentally different from products due to the interaction between provider and user as well as their intangibility he felt this 'must lead to a unique industry culture' (2002, p.1084). This culture he felt should evidence uniquely high values placed upon personal interaction, service quality and relationships. A key attribute identified in the literature on market orientation has been the way in which an organisation's culture is affected by its founder or leader. Kasper et al. (1999) examined the importance of social interaction, interest in employees and caring about people which they identified as being characteristic of a female leadership style. MacKenzie et al. (2001) illustrated in a single company study in the USA that a transformational leadership style resulted in stronger direct and indirect relationships with performance and organizational citizenship behaviour than did a transactional leadership style.

In 2001 Harris and Ogbonna investigated the links between leadership style and market orientation across a multi-industry sample including both private and public organizations using Narver and Slater's three component model of market orientation. (See Figure 1) They concluded positive relationships existed between both participative and supportive leadership styles and market orientation, whilst an instrumental leadership style had a negative relationship. The culture of a service organisation is also reflected in the degree of freedom accorded to employees in decision making about their own work. Many studies evidence the research interest in empowerment within the service sector (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Schneider and Bowen, 1995; Bowen et al., 2000). Kasper identified some of the characteristics of a market orientated culture as 'open, employee-oriented, results-oriented, professional and pragmatic' (2002, p.1053). He went on to highlight the balance between tight and loose control systems which provide employees with a clear strategic and operational framework within which to work, whilst empowering those employees to make decisions about their own activities in order to create value for satisfied customers. His reservation was whether these were reflected in an 'organisation's marketing thinking and practices'.

Kasper subscribed that an open employee-oriented culture was associated with customer knowledge and continuous learning from mistakes, as well as employee reflection on own performance and how that impacted upon the organisation's overall service. A pragmatic culture, he stated, 'does not go along with personal or departmental self-interest' (2002, p.1053). He concluded that a market oriented culture clearly communicates strategic and operational objectives to employees who

possess the required capabilities and attitude to deliver excellent service quality in an environment of mutual cooperation. Furthermore the leadership styles within such organisations need to be democratic, achievement-oriented and employee-oriented with a strong emphasis on empowerment. Gounaris (2008) takes the discussion further, by considering internal market orientation within the service sector, and offers some 'preliminary evidence' linking organizational performance to employee job satisfaction. Gotteland et al. (2007) recognized that most empirical research has been focused upon the effects of market orientation upon an organisation's performance. A handful of studies dealt with the methods used to implement market orientated strategies (Ruekert, 1992; Day, 1994b, Kennedy et al., 2003). Two key areas of variation were exposed in their review of the studies, in terms of measurement of organizational performance, and the theoretical underpinning of the studies themselves. The emphasis upon the performance-market orientation relationship has resulted in the identification of moderating and mediating effects. However, as the studies used different theoretical bases they concluded that the results were difficult compare. The results of meta-analysis undertaken by Rodriguez Cano et al. (2004) and Ellis (2006) have addressed this issue in some way, enabling some control of the sources of variance.

5. Conclusions

In spite of the differences in these perspectives Cadogan and Diamantopoulos (1995) suggested that the behavioural and cultural perspectives reveal overlaps between the various dimensions investigated. Avlonitis and Gounaris (1997) warned against separating the cultural and behavioural approaches and also identified an overlap between these two perspectives and the systems-based approach. Helfert et al. argued that a market-oriented information system will have information generation and dissemination (See Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) as two sub-dimensions. Moreover they stated that :

'all system-based dimensions are operationalised with regard to customers and competitors as well as inter-functional coordination' (2002, p.1121).

The factor 'Interfunctional Coordination' (Deng and Dart, 1994) highlighted the sharing of market information and interdepartmental integration as critical elements of an organisation's market orientation. It recognised the need for all parts of an organisation to accept responsibility for servicing the market in terms of sharing information and coordinating efforts. Although much of the literature focuses primarily upon the organizational co-ordination and communications necessary to deliver high quality services to customers the discussion has been extended to the issue of managing relationships by writers such as Narus and Anderson (1995), and Helfert and Vith (1999) who suggested that most relationships are handled by teams and as such significant interfunctional co-ordination by way of an integrated communication structure within an organisation is required to ensure that an organisation is able to manage its relationships and networks. Ritter (1999) clearly identified that the resources required to ensure the effective management of relationships include information as well as physical, human and financial resources.

As well as two of the dimensions of market orientation, information generation and dissemination about both customers and competitors, Helfert et al. (2002) suggested that a good understanding of an organisation's internal procedures, competencies and strategies will also be evident within a market oriented firm due to the high degree of inter-functional cooperation. On reviewing the various definitions of market orientation Ruekert (1992) identified that the differences were primarily in terms of emphasis rather than content, and suggested that they were not mutually exclusive, rather different approaches to the subject. Pelham (1993, 1997) was of the opinion that possibly trying to encompass all dimensions of the market orientation construct was too limiting. His argument followed that the generation of both formal and informal market intelligence does not guarantee that the organisation understands and responds to customers' needs, or indeed its capability to provide value to those customers. From the literature Lafferty and Hult (2001) identified five methods of conceptualizing the construct of market orientation: the decision-making perspective; the market-intelligence perspective; the culturally based behavioural perspective; the strategic perspective; and the customer perspective, and integrated them into a synthesised framework. Acknowledging the inherent differences between the approaches this work produced four general areas of agreement including the importance of shared information, interfunctional coordination of marketing activities and relationships, an emphasis on customers and finally a responsiveness to market activities with appropriate actions.

6. Implications

The popular view articulated by Agarwal et al. (2003) that market orientation is understood to be 'an indicator of the extent to which a firm implements the "marketing concept" leads us back to the original question set by authors of this paper - Are we any closer to understanding what is meant by market orientation ?

This review demonstrates that there are as many differences as there are similarities between leading researchers in the field. The conclusion of this paper is that the concept of market orientation falls between two stalls, strategic management and marketing management. Whilst the latter has been addressed in great detail in order to articulate and implement the concept in theoretical terms, more needs to be done to develop appropriate and effective methods of practical implementation. Simply communicating something to employees does not mean that they have understood or accepted the message. Perhaps our next step is to review the communication models being used to identify key variables and effects within organisations which profess to be market orientated. This suggestion is strongly rooted in Kohli and Jaworski's (1990) model, specifically in terms of the dissemination of information to develop a coordinated response across the organisation.

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