

Customers as Co-marketers: a Triadic Value Creation in Reference Networks

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Leena Aarikka-Stenroos

Turku School of Economics, University of Turku

E-mail: leena.aarikka-stenroos@utu.fi

Address: Turku School of Economics, FI-20014 University of Turku, Finland

Anne Jalkala

Lappeenranta University of Technology

E-mail: anne.jalkala@lut.fi

Abstract:

This paper examines the role of customers as co-marketers in BtoB markets and triadic value creation in reference networks. Reference networks consist of sellers, buyers, and reference customers. The paper draws on the industrial network and value co-creation literature and prior research on customer references. We develop understanding on value co-creation in reference networks through an extensive qualitative dataset consisting of over 70 interviews of suppliers and buyers of knowledge intensive services and solutions. The paper contributes to the literature on value co-creation by providing a more structured understanding on customers' role as co-marketers in BtoB markets and by developing a framework which delineates how actors in a reference network co-create value for each other. We propose that reference customer as co-marketers provide information about the realized value-in-use, such as functionality of the solution in operation, return-on-investment and organizational learning.

Keywords: customer references, value co-creation, value, buyer-seller-relationships, value-in-use, co-marketer, co-promotion

1 INTRODUCTION

In business-to-business markets, value co-creation in interaction between suppliers and customers is pivotal (Möller, 2006; Lindgreen et al., 2009). Value co-creation occurs through a reciprocal interaction process where both parties are active and influence each other (Grönroos, 2008; Payne et al., 2008; Grönroos, 2010), the idea that IMP-school has long examined (e.g. Håkansson 1982; Ford et al. 1986).

Value co-creation in business markets is facing fundamental changes which complicate buyer-seller interaction; increasing customization, knowledge and -service intensity and technological complexity blur the goals of value creation and make the supplier and the customer more dependent on each other's resources (e.g. Möller, 2006; Jacob & Ulaga, 2008, Nordin & Kowalkowski 2010). As the business focus is shifting away from tangibles towards intangibles such as skills, information and knowledge (Vargo and Lusch 2004) buyers and sellers are facing the challenge of how to communicate and evaluate the value potential of various offerings. On one hand, sellers face challenges in demonstrating their complex value propositions. On the other, the resulting value-in-use can be assessed only afterwards, which makes it difficult for buyers to evaluate alternative offerings (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola 2012, Anderson & Wynstra 2010).

Accordingly, actors involved in the exchange of complex knowledge-intensive offerings need indirect evidence of the potential partner's value creation potential. It is only the track record of existing customer references (Möller & Törrönen 2003; Anderson & Wynstra 2010) that concretely displays the supplier's problem-solving ability and gives some estimates of its ability to co-create value. Consequently, customer references are increasingly needed in order to concretize and demonstrate value propositions for potential customers and other stakeholders.

The importance of customer referencing has been addressed in various BtoB settings (e.g., Salminen & Möller 2006; Jalkala & Salminen, 2010), but the perspective taken is predominantly that of the sellers. The composition of customer referencing, however, is inherently "a net" that consists of the reference customer, the seller and the potential buyer; nevertheless, the current research has not examined the perspectives of reference customers and customers and their relations to each other. Consequently, prior research lacks a network perspective. In order to fulfill this gap, this paper develops the concept of a reference network, referring to a network that includes at least three actors (the seller, buyer and reference customer) and enables interaction and value-creation through customer referencing. We argue that reference networks are an increasingly important, yet rather unexplored, network configuration in BtoB markets.

Our starting point is an assumption that the actors of a reference network are able to create value for each other: reference customers co-create the supplier's marketing activities and thus create value for the supplier; at the same time they generate value for potential customers, too, and through interaction they perceive value themselves as well. Research on value creation has examined particularly the customer's role as a co-producer and highlighted how value occurs in the user's context, when goods and services are put to use (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Very recent research has elaborated this idea further by identifying several forms of co-creation (see e.g. Payne et al. 2011, Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola 2012). Some of these forms can be easily related to customer

referencing, such as co-promotion (Payne et al. 2011) and co-marketing (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola 2012). The customers' contribution to other customers' experiences is studied also within the research on customer engagement (e.g. Libai et al. 2010), the concept that discusses how customers are involved in marketing communication in BtoC-markets. This research however offers very little understanding about the ways in which customers, and particularly reference customers, act as co-marketers in BtoB markets and how co-creation occurs in such triadic settings.

In sum, the existing literature on customer referencing or value creation does not offer a structured understanding on the ways in which customers act as co-marketers in BtoB markets. Moreover, little is known about the value that the reference network creates and the different ways through which sellers, buyers and reference customers co-create value for each other in reference networks. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to examine the role of customers as co-marketers in reference networks and the related value co-creation between sellers, buyers, and reference customers. Therefore, this research focuses on the following research question: *How is value co-created in a triadic reference network consisting of a supplier, reference customer and a potential customer in BtoB markets?* The answer is developed through answering to the following three sub questions: *1) What are the characteristics of reference networks? 2) How do reference customers act as co-marketers in BtoB markets? 3) What kind of value elements do actors of reference networks generate and perceive from each other?*

In order to solve these questions, the paper combines value-co-creation thinking from S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008b), interaction in networks from IMP-school (Håkansson & Snehota 1995, Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 1994) and customer reference literature (Salminen & Möller 2006; Jalkala & Salminen 2010, Ruokolainen 2008). In the empirical part, we combine two extensive qualitative data sets in order to analyze the role of reference customers as co-marketers. The empirical data of the study consists of 36 semi-structured interviews conducted in industrial project- and process industries and 35 narrative interviews conducted in knowledge intensive service industries. In total, several hundreds of pages of transcribed interview data are analyzed. As a result, we develop a conceptual framework that delineates the value elements of a reference network triad. Our findings contribute to the growing literature on value co-creation by providing more a structured understanding on customers' role as co-marketers in BtoB markets. We also advance the research on value creation in networks by developing a framework which depicts how value resulting from user-experiences is created in reference networks.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section we develop a preliminary framework of value creation in reference networks by drawing on prior literature on value co-creation, industrial networks and customer references. After the theoretical discussion, we present the methods and the findings from a qualitative study. Finally, we present implications of the reference network and triadic value creation for further theory development as well as guidelines for practitioners within knowledge intensive service and solution businesses.

2 CUSTOMERS AS CO-MARKETERS IN NETWORKED BUSINESS

In order to build a tentative framework on triadic value co-creation through a reference network we first discuss the current knowledge on value co-creation and customers' role as co-marketers and co-promoters. Then we bring in the network perspective and the customer referencing research. In the end of this section we amalgamate these three approaches by presenting the idea of a value-creating reference network.

2.1 Value co-creation and customers as co-marketers

Recent research on value co-creation has deepened and extended the concept of value co-creation by investigating its divergent dimensions and forms (e.g. Frow et al. 2011, Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola 2012). Different forms of value co-creation assumingly put the customer as a co-creator into divergent roles. This paper focuses on *co-marketer* role referring to that the customer together with the seller party creates marketing activities and messages and thus generates value (see Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2012). This conceptualization suggests that if customers experience sufficient value from the use of the offering in its application contexts, they began to act as co-marketers; for example reference customers and referees promote a supplier's value creation skills by sharing information on the value-in-use experiences in the networked community (see Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2012).

According to the current research, an active role of customers in terms of marketing activities is increasing. For example, Cova and Dalli (2009) discuss about working consumers who through consumption generate experiences and share them further; thus are involved tightly in value creation. Recent literature has identified divergent means how customers are able to generate value for each other: for example through brand communities consumers generate value for other consumers (e.g. Schau et al. 2010). Assumingly on BtoB markets reference customers as co-marketers are able to contribute value generation likewise.

Moreover, recent research on value creation has identified divergent forms of co-creation of which several forms fit with the idea of reference customers as co-marketers. Findings by Frow et al. (2011) suggest that co-creation can be divided into more discrete forms of co-creation such as *co-promotion* referring to "two or more actors collaborating on promotional activities related to a specific product, brand or other entity" (e.g. brand communities). They also have identified a form labeled *co-experience* that refers to "actors integrating their resources over time and across multiple encounters creating a shared experience, with different outcomes than those occurring in more discrete individual interaction" (e.g. sub-brand clubs that provide opportunities to co-experience at specific life-stages) and *co-meaning creation* referring to "interaction between actors that produce new meanings and knowledge through multiple encounters over time".

2.2 Linking networks to co-marketing: customers' and suppliers' interaction in networked business reflecting co-marketing

Studies on industrial networks provide understanding on particularly network aspects of the phenomenon by discussing how business actors interact in networks and how this interaction impacts value creation for other network actors. This existing knowledge can be used in outlining the reference network and the ways how particularly “co-marketers” contribute to value creation. IMP-literature for example suggests that in networked business, customers can share information further through their network relationships and thus accumulate other their suppliers' promotion power. For example, the activities of mediation (Ritter 2000), signaling reference effects (Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 1994) and market functions (Walter et al. 2001) illustrate how acquired relationships with customers may facilitate suppliers' business and sales activities. Ritter (2000) studied conceptually the positive and negative effects of inter-organizational relationships on other relationships by using triadic configurations and identified a positive “assistance effect” which can be linked to co-marketing: this effect realizes when experiences gained in one relationship are used in the other and this is a typical scenario for the reference function of relationships. Moreover, Helfert & Vith (1999, 554) found that customers can contribute actively to the market access of a supplier company by providing leads to network partners, by giving a good reference to the supplier company and passing on its information to their business partners, and by bringing members of two companies together. They also distinguish a more passive way for customers to contribute as many companies employ the names of their most renowned customers whose good reputation or image can contribute to the market access of a supplier.

These researches bring in the positive impact of some relationships to other relationships in the network and suggest how existing relationships facilitate creating and establishing new business with customers. This literature also indirectly suggests different means for co-marketers' contribution: customer reference can contribute actively e.g. by providing leads and facilitating access that benefits the seller's sales process.

2.3 Customer references and a network view

Customer referencig has earned only little academic research, with a few notable exceptions (Salminen 1997; Salminen and Möller 2006). Salminen and Möller (2006) identified the potential modes of reference usage and proposed a conceptual framework, which includes reference practices – such as taking reference calls, hosting reference visits and speaking at industry events – that are concrete examples through which customers can act as co-marketers.

Although the number of studies focusing specifically on customer references is low, several authors mention their importance and relevance in passing (e.g., Rajala 1997; Currie 2004; Das and Buddress 2007; Forman et al. 2007; DeKunder and Kohli 2008; Ala-Risku 2009; Lehtimäki et al. 2009). These studies often concern the marketing of complex solutions and projects in the information and communication technology sector. Apart from observations on the salience of customer references in the information and communication industry, several studies have mentioned their importance in the project and process technology

industries (Rajala 1997; Lehtimäki et al. 2009) and in the marketing of knowledge-intensive services (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2012).

Customer referencing typically occurs in a triad consisting of a seller, a reference customer and a potential customer (Salminen, 1997). Thus, at least three actors are involved in customer referencing, and thus these key actors can be examined as a network – a triad which is the smallest entity that comprises a network.

2.4 Synthesis on triadic value-co-creation through reference network involving reference customers as co-marketers

Synthesizing literature on value co-creation, IMP-literature and the customer reference literature, Figure 1 presents a tentative framework for the basic elements of triadic value co-creation within the reference network. Customer referencing is conceptualized as a triadic interaction through a reference network: it involves the supplier, the reference customer and the potential customer, emphasizes interactive information sharing through the network relations, and creates value for all involved actors. Suppliers communicate their specialized skills by involving reference customers. Reference customers as co-marketers contribute to suppliers' value propositions by communicating their satisfaction and user experiences as perceived value-in-use and co-construct value for other customers.

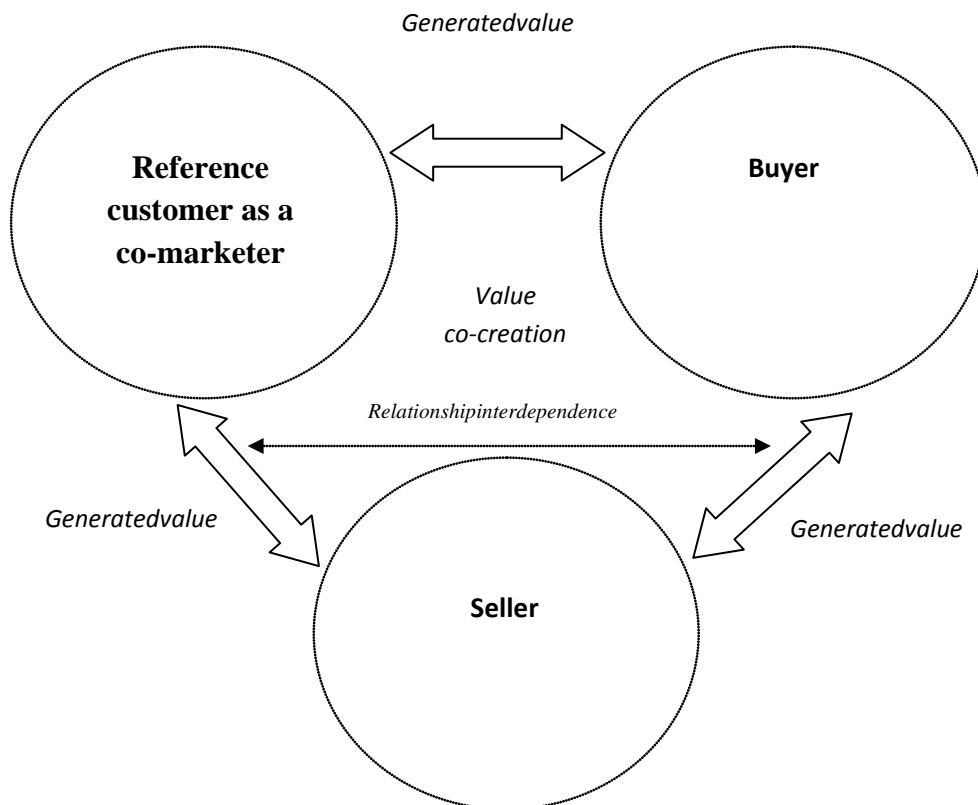


Figure 1 A tentative framework: The reference network and triadic value co-creation generating value for and by all involved actors

3 METHODS

In order to study reference networks and co-marketer role implemented through customer references, a qualitative research design was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the study (cf. Patton, 1989). Given the multiple manifestations of customer referencing, an intensive qualitative method was considered appropriate.

The study combines various data sources including personal interviews, episodic narratives, and customer-reference descriptions gathered from the case companies' Web sites. The research contexts are knowledge intensive business services and solution business. We conducted 38 semi-structured personal interviews with suppliers of complex industrial solutions and 35 interviews that included episodic narratives with customers and suppliers of knowledge-intensive services. A total of 73 personal interviews were conducted with managers. The data was gathered from firms in different industry sectors including process technology (two firms), information-technology sector (two firms) and knowledge-intensive services (24 firms). The interviews covered themes including the role of customer referencing, and different tasks that customer referencing fulfills.

The data analysis involved coding the transcribed interview data with the help of Nvivo 8 software in order to identify relevant concepts related to the phenomena of interest. The coding process was inductive and iterative. The first step was to categorize the data roughly according to the different value elements that the actors involved in the reference network perceive from customer referencing. The goal was to derive findings that were grounded in the data, but were also resonant with relevant prior literature. In order to demonstrate the basis of the interpretations and the construction of the proposed frameworks the findings are reported in conjunction with illustrative extracts from the empirical data. The analysis is in process, and therefore we are now able to present the first preliminary findings. In the following phases of analysis, we will focus on analyzing the value elements more deeply.

4 RESULTS ON REFERENCE CUSTOMERS AS CO-MARKETERS AND VALUE CREATORS

On the basis of our interview research, knowledge on customers' role as co-marketers and triadic value creation was developed: several means/roles for their contribution were identified, multiple value elements generated for all actors were identified and also the essence of the reference network was clarified. These findings together suggest how a triadic value creation through reference network occurs. As the analysis is at early development phase, we are able to present preliminary findings with illustrative examples from the data.

4.1 Reference customers as co-marketers: the means and roles

First we analyze how reference customers act as co-marketers in BtoB markets. Table 1 presents the preliminary findings on the identified means and roles. Reference customers were involved not only through customer referencing but also through word-of-mouth and testimonial practices, serving as reference site hosts, and through recommending.

Table 1 Means and roles of reference customers as co-marketers

Mean	How the value is co-created	Conceptualizations of co-marketer roles
Customer referencing	Reference customer creates value by evidencing the outcome and benefits of the offering	Co-marketer as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • co-evidencer
Word-of-mouth	Reference customer creates value by sharing advices and judgments on the buying and using the offering	Co-marketer as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • co-diagnoser • co-solver of the customer problem • co-messenger
Serving as reference site hosts	Reference customer creates value by evidencing the functionality of the offering and providing opportunities to observe the offering in use.	Co-marketer as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • co-evidencer • co-decision supporter • co-experience creator • co-salesman
Testimonizing	Reference customer creates value by speaking for the offering and revealing information on its own business	Co-marketer as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • co-seller • co-salesman • co-decision supporter • co-experience creator

4.2 Values created through customer referencing creates for all actors

The analysis of data also suggested what kind of value (value elements) is created for all involved reference network actors when reference customers play their divergent co-marketer roles. The identified value elements are listed below according to the involved actors (potential customer i.e. the buyer, the seller and the reference customer).

- **Values for the potential customer**

- Value originating from *receiving credible information*: Co-marketers' involvement provides information that is valuable because customers perceive it credible. According to data, customers repeatedly highlighted that they were able to gain credible information outputs for their buying processes through co-marketers' involvement. Co-marketers information spreading and sharing generates value for customers because thus they gain easily and fast credible information; this saves buyers' information seeking costs.
- Value originating from an *eased and accelerated buying process*: Co-marketers' involvement facilitated potential customers' buying process. It generated value by decreasing perceived risks and saving psychological costs of buying.
- Value originating from *lower information processing costs*: Co-marketers generate value also because their activities save also information processing costs. The customers told that if they rely on customer referencing and co-marketers' judgments, they save evaluation efforts: the reference customer or referrer has already "done the evaluation work" and because it gives its name to the firm's use or spreads positive messages on the seller, the potential customer can rely on these prior judgments to some extent.
- Value originating from the *increased evidence on the seller's performance*: Customers also indicated that it is easier to be ensured on the seller's capabilities and give them trial projects, if a trusted actor as a co-marketer or a large amount of customer references provides evidence on successful performance, as the following example by a buyer from saw-mill industry demonstrates:

"It's pretty hard to hire a designer if he/she just shows up and says 'hey, I'm a designer, wanna hire me?' You want to see what he/she has done before, and the references have to be good too. You wouldn't hire a lawyer who has lost all his previous cases."
- Value based on *the assurance* that co-promoters provide: Data indicated that if the co-promoter is considered as a trustworthy actor with good evaluation skills, it generates even more value as this activity provides a sort of warranty on the supplier's performance. Many informants mentioned that if the co-marketer promotes a supplier with low-quality skills and performance, this action damages also its own reputation. Actors' activities on the markets are thus controlled through reputation and customer referencing activities; co-promoters expose their own reputation if they actively recommend or spoke for the supplier. The existence of such control mechanisms generates value for buyers who can then take co-promoters' activities as guarantees.
- During buying process, buyers aim to find an optimal solution for their problems. According to data, reference customers may serve as co-diagnosers and co-solvers in the customer's problem solving process in which they

generate value for potential customers by *outlining how potential customer could use the seller's offerings and what could be the customer's latent needs*, as the following citation explicates:

"Reference descriptions are very important to the customer who has not previously utilized design in its business. This is because customers note that 'okay, even on our business and scale design can be advantageous'. The typical image is that only large enterprises can benefit from design."

- Value originating from *consolidated buying decision*: Data suggested that reference customer as decision supporters strengthen the buyers' decisions.
 - Value originating from *sharing experiences*: Data indicated that in BtoB markets reference customers among other customers serve as co-experience creators, as customers—both potential and reference customers - meet for example at seminars, reference visits and meeting rooms and then able to share their experiences on suppliers, offerings, industries, and markets.
 - Value originating from *belonging to a community*: Data revealed that customer referencing bring up situations and opportunities for business actors to experience that they belong to a group, a community, an industry or a sub network. Such value can generate even more value, because the members of such communities tended to reciprocally help each other.
 - Value originating from *status enhancement*: Data suggested that if co-marketers are appreciated firms or individuals and belong to the prestige group of business actors, the customer's own position and status was often elevated.
- **Values for the supplier/seller**
 - Value originating from *increased positive messages*: Co-marketer as co-messenger conveys positive messages which support and fortify and extend the supplier's marketing communication, sales and other marketing activities.
 - Value originating from increasing *efficiency in sales*: Co-marketers strengthen and validate the sales argumentation: their praise of the offering and outcomes is more effective because it is coming from an external source compared coming from the supplier itself.
 - Value originating from *bred sales*: Analysis of the data revealed that particularly small firms and new supplier entrants see that they do not possess a good sale competence. Particularly on KIBS-industries entrepreneur professionals stated that they often did not do enough "active marketing and sales" themselves but their clients spoke for them through recommendations and customer referencing. Through decision supporter and co-seller roles, the reference customer encouraged and strengthened the buyers' decisions that saved the sellers' efforts.
 - Value originating from improved *customer acquisition* (in efforts and speed): Data indicated that the customer acquisition process was often accelerated and facilitated due the co-promoter's activities. This is because of the seller does not need to start interaction from the scratch as the co-marketer's activities have already prepared the customer.
 - Value based on *status enhancement*: Analysis showed that numerous co-promoters or acknowledged established co-promoters amend the status of the supplier. The suppliers were even proud on their achievements and merits, i.e. they had been able to win appreciated business actors themselves.

- Value based on *improved internal knowledge resource and learning*: Data revealed that reference customers also generate business intelligence of the supplier and assist aligning the strategy. Thus, reference customers act as strategy developers and as intelligence / data providers.
- Value based on *feedback*: Reference customers serve as feedback providers. The mere existence of co-promoters and customer's willingness to serve as reference customers is a positive feedback. Thus reference customers also play a quality controller role.
- Value originating from support in *brand building*: In some cases, reference customers served as brand builders; they build brand loyalty and brand experience.
- Value originating from *the communal reciprocal support*: Customer referencing enable also the suppliers to experience that they belong to a group, a community, to industry or to sub network, whose members reciprocally help each other.
- Value originating from *evidencing good performance*: Reference customers and cases evidence the promised outcomes and benefits; they are co-evidencers. Sellers noted that they need not to evidence their competences constantly due to reference lists and positive evaluations that indicate the seller company is performing outstandingly.
- Value originating from *easing market entries*: Co-promoters facilitate gaining the very first deals. Thus they created value particularly for the new entrants or the mature firms targeting new areas.
- Value related to *targeting*: Data indicated that through co-promoters it is much easier to target offerings and contact and interact with compatible partners.
- Value in *building close resistant relationships*: Based on data, due to co-promoters activities that indicate commitment and good relationships, it is easier to build new relationships with new customers.
- Value in *executing business*: Due to good relationships, goodwill, reciprocity and positive attitude of co-promoters, motivation to work increases.
- **Values for the reference customer, i.e. the co-promoter**
 - Value originating from *post purchase behavior that consolidates and confirms earlier buying decisions* and commitment.
 - Value originating from *the feel of power*: reference customers possess power as they are able to share their judgments further. According to data, co-promoters' opinions were recognized by the potential new customers and seller parties.
 - Value originating from *status enhancement*: Co-marketers' statements and existence are appreciated which may improve their status.
 - Value originating from *improved service*: In some cases, the reference customer noted that they gained improved and fast service because they were reference customers.
 - Value originating from *improved attention* in the networked business: Reference customers' name, business and competences are put forward and their own reputation is built through customer referencing.

Co-promoting phenomenon did not create value only by generating benefits; also several disadvantages and costs were mentioned in the data.

Moreover, findings also suggest that the reference network is a more extensive entity than a triad: our analysis revealed that triadic reference networks often are perceived as an extensive reference network that consists of divergent network relationships within the industry, i.e. the reference network includes also other actors than the focal triad actors.

4.3 The reference network and its characteristics/essence

Finally, our analysis elaborated the earlier framework and developed new knowledge on what are the characteristics of the reference network and how such network should be depicted. Figure 2 presents the refined model that illustrates how the triadic value co-creation occurs in reference networks and shows divergent gained value elements from all parties' perspective.

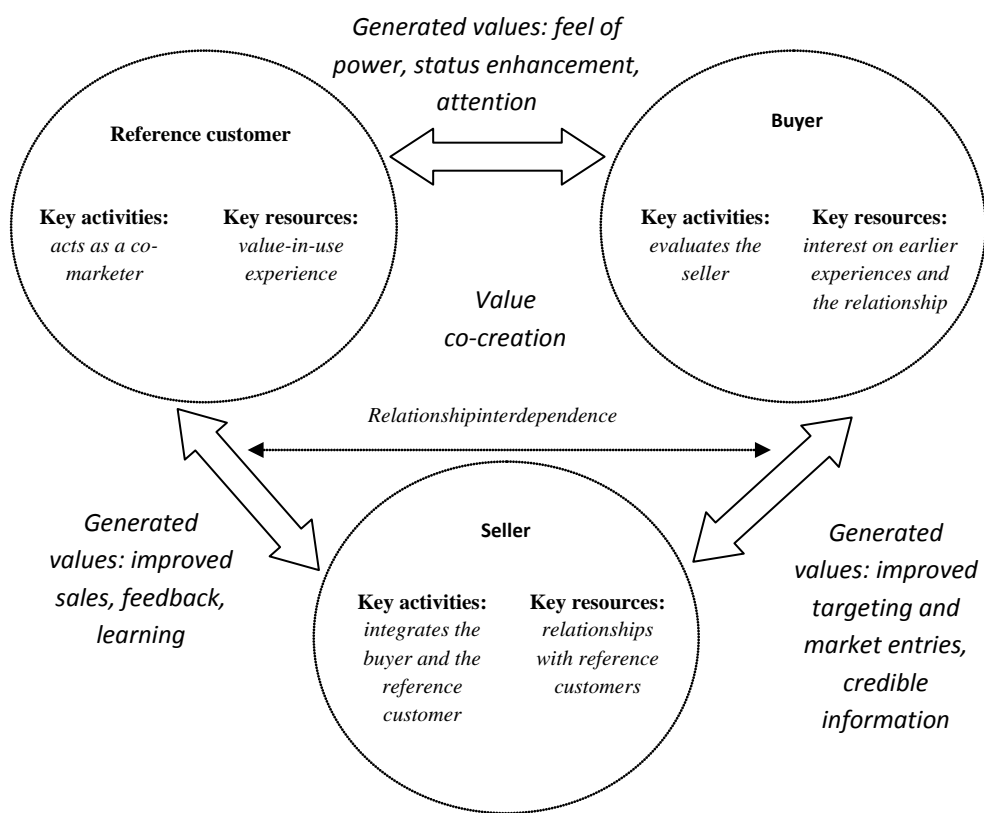


Figure 2 Results and the refined framework

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have analyzed one form value co-creation process – co-marketing - in the context of knowledge intensive offerings and solutions. We contributed by constructing an empirically grounded framework that presents how value is co-created in the reference networks. The framework presents value elements which are generated through customer references and provides a focused analysis on roles/means of reference customers as co-marketers.

As the main contribution, we emphasize a triadic value creation, as we analyzed how reference customers create value for new customers and for the seller and other way round. We contributed also to reference marketing literature, as we linked it to value research and network research by analyzing reference customers' and potential customers' viewpoints instead of analyzing mere the seller's viewpoint and customer referencing as a sales tool. Our approach emphasizes customer references as active network actors and experiencers instead of marketers' tools.

Through empirical analysis we identified elements of value that potential customers, reference customers and suppliers experience as co-created outputs of a reference network. The final framework also displays the main characteristics of the reference network. Reference customers as co-marketers provide information on realized value-in-use, such as functionality of the solution in operation, return-on-investment and organizational learning. In other words, customer references evidence and present realized value-in-use: they can demonstrate, concretize, visualize and describe the content of complex solutions and their benefits to potential customers by displaying previously delivered solutions with similar characteristics. Moreover, through reference networks parties together co-create marketing messages that resonate with potential customer's problems and needs.

As value is a multidimensional object of investigation (cf. Grönroos 2011), our study integrated several aspects of value creation: we enhanced understanding of the elements of value, the creation of value and value of relational interaction between the supplier firm, the potential customer and the reference customer in the KIBS and solution context.

As implication and the issue of future research we suggest, that diverse co-marketer roles from co-messenger to co-experiencer are converging in networked business markets, potentially due to increased use of social media and the experience economy. Therefore in future, researchers investigating BtoB markets should put efforts on studying value creation, sales and buying in markets that are increasingly dominated by networked market actors through social media and Web 2.0. As implication, we also predict that reference information may face some inflation as a result of overwhelming social media practices and customer referencing, and bought testimonies.

As avenues for further research we suggest studying the relations between concepts such as status, reputation and legitimacy that all are important in co-marketing. Moreover, co-promoting phenomenon does not only generate benefits; also several disadvantages and costs can be found, and these aspects deserve more investigations in future research. We also note that there are still major gaps in BtoB marketing communication research and therefore focusing on marketing communication aspects on customer referencing and value creation could be a worthwhile viewpoint in future, as well.

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