

# **The Ford Explorer – Firestone Tires Crisis: a Rules Theory Analysis of Relationships**

**Sergio Biggemann**

Senior Lecturer

Marketing Department – School of Business

University of Otago

Ph: 64 3 479 8467

Fax: 64 3 479 8172

[sbiggemann@business.otago.ac.nz](mailto:sbiggemann@business.otago.ac.nz)

Dunedin – New Zealand

**Francis Buttle**

Adjunct Professor (Marketing and CRM)

Macquarie Graduate School of Management

Macquarie University

M: 0403 752 750

Int M: +61 403 752 750

[Francis.Buttle@mgs.edu.au](mailto:Francis.Buttle@mgs.edu.au)

Sydney, NSW 2109 – Australia

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(Competitive Paper)

## **Abstract**

In the late 1990's and early 2000's several accidents were reported of Ford Explorers equipped with Firestone tires rolling over as a consequence of tires' failures. By the end of 2000 the death toll was estimated at more than 250, and some 3,000 incidents had been associated with 'defective' Firestone tires mounted on Ford Explorers. These problems were frequently encountered in Saudi Arabia and Venezuela but also occurred in mid-western US. The US reports triggered a crisis for the two companies.

The magnitude and complexity of the problem was such that neither Ford nor Firestone could provide an acceptable explanation. Both companies denied responsibility and did not react as customers might have expected but instead chose to blame each other. The approach taken by Ford and Firestone to the management of the crisis not only severely damaged their century-old relationship but also enabled other parties to exploit this opportunity for commercial gain. Consequences included destroying both companies' bottom line and, of course, damage to brand reputation.

We analyse the episode using Rules Theory. This models the episode and the companies' interactions as if the parties were applying sets of rules. Two types of rule account for their interaction – rules of meaning and rules of action. Rules of meaning enable each party to make sense of the other's acts and rules of action guide each company's response based on the meaning given to the other's previous act, as well as on previous experiences and future expectations. Rules Theory recognises that both Ford and Firestone are embedded in extended networks which both influence and are influenced by this episode.

In our study of the Ford–Firestone crisis we first portray the business-to-business dyadic relationship before the roll-over incidents. Then we represent the network setting by identifying additional parties that became involved, and finally we analyse the parties' acts as if rules of meaning and action were guiding interaction throughout the evolution of the episode. We are able to portray changes to structural attributes of the dyadic relationship as a consequence of the crisis, which also lead the reconfiguration of the network.

We put forward a number of practical and methodological implications of our study.

## **Introduction**

Companies in business-to-business markets interact with one another. The outcome of such interaction is inter-company relationships, relationships that are deemed crucial for business success.

Each time a company acts, it potentially affects those with which it has relationships. From a network perspective it goes even further; such acts are thought to have effect even on those companies not directly linked, because of the enmeshment that characterises the extended networks in which companies operate. Continuous exchanges of acts over time serve as learning devices through which companies develop shared understanding of what is permitted and what is not –*norms*–, develop ties that keep the parties connected –*bonds*–, build up the belief that the other has the capabilities to perform the task while looking after the interests of both parties –*trust*–, whilst increasing the parties’ desire to keep working together in a manner such that both contribute to and benefit from the relationship –*commitment*. These features of relationships are potentially changed –for better or worse– each time an act is performed by either party. Likewise changes in one relationship also affect others in the extended network and potentially change the party’s network position. Long tenure relationships, it is believed, are more likely to overcome problems. However, there can be occasions in which changes in the environment or external episodes motivate the parties to behave in unusual ways, thereby diminishing the value of relationships, as if the only thing that counts is unilateral survival. Such occasions, in an enmeshed network setting, bring to the scene new players, whose only contribution may only be to make the situation even more confusing.

We studied the ‘Ford – Firestone Tire Crisis’ to understand how companies can act and re-act in complex, threatening, situations and how such acts might lead not only to unexpected but also highly undesirable outcomes. We studied changes in the network position of both companies, as well as changes that occurred to their relationship and the network context in which they operate. We present our findings by using Rules Theory.

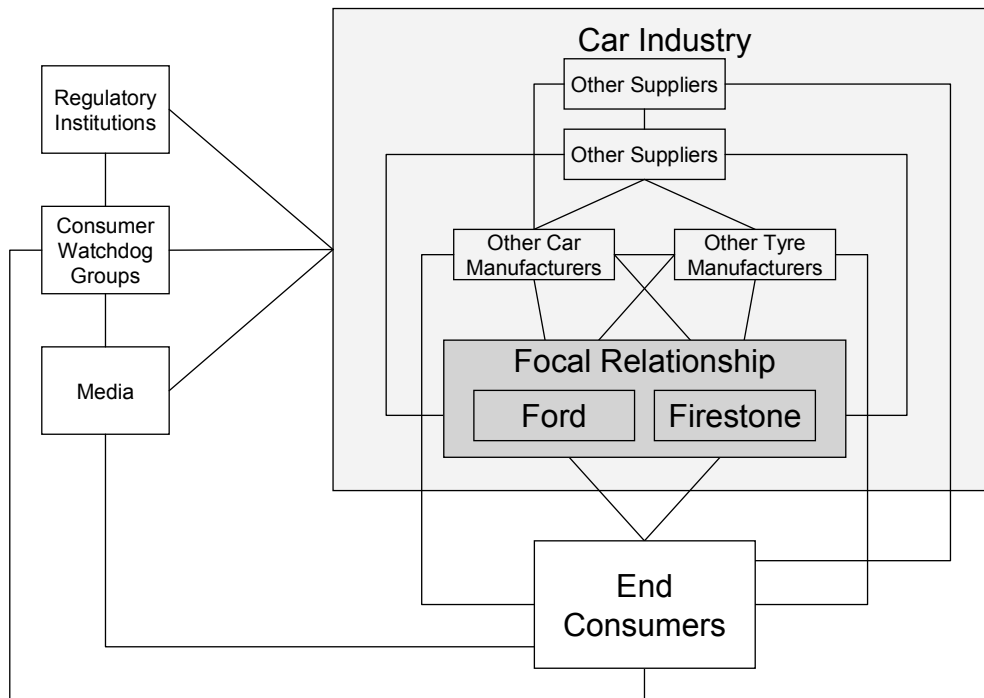
## **The case at a glance**

Ford Motor Company and its close ally Firestone Tires faced a serious crisis when many Ford Explorers equipped with Firestone AT/ATX tires rolled over as a consequence of tire failures. In 1999 the first fatalities occurred in Saudi Arabia and not much later similar accidents were reported in Venezuela. Ford immediately reacted by blaming the weather and vehicle owners for under-inflating their tires. However, Ford also began replacing tires. It was not until March 2000 when a Ford Explorer rollover in Texas USA left one of the car occupants brain-damaged and paraplegic that the American authorities intervened, triggering a massive tire recall and a lawsuit brought by the victim’s family. The case was settled out of court in January 2001 (Bowe, 2001), but by that time many more cases and fatalities were reported and therefore neither Ford nor Firestone could continue blaming the weather or car owners. They, instead, were blaming each other.

## **Data Collection**

Although the roll-over problems commenced in the late 90’s, most of the acts described here occurred from 2001. These were closely monitored by the news media that regarded this as a hot issue. Hartley (2006) portrays a well documented case, and

**Figure 1. Network Setting of Ford-Firestone Crisis**



we largely rely on his collection of the information. However, we have also verified data going to the prime source and gathered additional information from other sources, particularly for our descriptions of the major acts of the parties. Although the implications –legal and financial- of the case were mainly in the US, the majority of the problems were observed in Venezuela. Therefore, we have supplemented the information published in American newspapers with news from Venezuelan media.

## Data Management

The information we have collated largely consists of stories from newspapers. Some stories report the parties' actions, some were instead the parties' intentions to act which we construed based on official communiqués or press releases from the companies involved. Others are editorial columns and there are number of third-party commentaries. For organising information we colour coded at the level of the paragraph performing an hermeneutical classification of the information, as described in Llewellyn (1993). We initially separated the information as company –Ford or Firestone- actions, company communiqués, media observations, regulatory institutions' communiqués, principally those emanating from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). We identified a number of other parties to the episode including other suppliers, other buyers, consumer watchdog groups, customers, as well as management 'gurus'. We illustrate the network setting of the case in figure 1.

We also coded data as relationship-related-data; i.e., actions (including declarations) that might affect the focal relationship; internal-affairs-data, and product-recall-data. Not all data pertained to these three categories but it still helped in organising the texts, which were later on used for our Rules Theory analysis.

## **Background**

The Ford-Firestone business relationship has endured more than a century; Henry Ford bought tires from Harvey Firestone in 1896, even before either company was formed. From then onwards Firestone has met 50% or more of Ford's original equipment tire requirements. The companies started up a joint research initiative for rubber production in Brazil. The relationship had also an important emotional dimension. Waddell (2006) mentions that the only person Ford trusted and respected more than Harvey Firestone was Thomas Edison. In addition, Ford's grandson married Firestone's granddaughter in 1947 adding deeper affective links to an already important commercial relationship.

Drawing on published typologies of business relationships, the pre-crisis Ford–Firestone relationship could be portrayed as an ideal relationship, enabled by trust developed over the long-term (Blau, 1964) and characterised by high levels of goodwill-trust (Sako, 1992). Other features of the relationship to stress are reduced social and cultural distance (Ford, 1980), strong social bonds (Holmlund & Törnroos, 1997), not only built up by the founders' friendship but also by their family ties, as well as commitment, shared values and willingness to communicate (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). All these are linked to relationship satisfaction and long-term relationship orientation (Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1998).

Such a relationship might have provided enough cushion to withstand virtually any crisis. However on May 21<sup>st</sup> 2001, less than 15 months after the first incident in the US, Firestone announced the termination of the 95 years old relationship. However, the termination effectively never occurred and nowadays, Ford and Firestone continue to transact as if nothing had happened.

We argue that the relationship was completely reconfigured not only as a consequence of the acts of the companies but also of members of the extended network. Likewise, the episode, as well as the parties' acts affected others in the network and somehow redefined the whole industrial sector rules of the game. Following we offer a Rules Theory portrayal of events.

## **Rules Theory**

Rules Theory draws on Pearce and Cronen's (1980) theory called "The Coordinated Management of Meaning". Rules Theory adopts a social constructionist perspective providing an analytical framework that can be used for making sense of business-to-business relationship structure and dynamics. Just as Pearce and Cronen asserted that persons in conversation co-construct their social realities, Rules Theory posits that inter-company interaction co-constructs business relationships which are potentially reshaped each time one party does something to the other. We call this something an 'act.'

Rules Theory provides the external viewer with an analytical tool to understand and explain inter-company interaction as if they were applying sets of rules that guide behaviour; rules of meaning and action. Rules of meaning are called constitutive rules and rules of action are called regulative rules. The meaning given to an act and any subsequent re-action are context dependent. Thus, when Company A acts (does something) towards Company B, the constitutive rule applied by Company B can be expressed as follows: in the context of (socially-constructed context of performance), Company A's act counts as X (meaning given to the act). Company B's reaction is guided by a regulative rule which can be expressed as follows: in the context of

**Figure 2. Primitive Form of a Constitutive Rule**

$$CR = \frac{MC_k}{A \supset [MC_i \rightarrow MC_j]}$$

Where: cR = Constitutive Rule  
A = Antecedent Condition  
MC = Meaningful Construction  
i, j, k = Levels of abstraction  
→ = Read "Count as"  
┌ = Read "In the context of"  
⊃ = Read "if ... then"

Source: Pearce and Cronen (1980)

(socially-constructed context of performance) if Company A did X, it is (obligatory, legitimate, irrelevant or prohibited) to do 'Y.', The four terms - obligatory, legitimate, irrelevant and prohibited - denote degrees of 'oughtness' in Company B's subsequent act. Constitutive rules describe how sensory inputs count as meanings and how meaning at one level of context counts as meaning at another level. Regulative rules guide action. Regulative rules describe the process by which particular acts are felt appropriate and guide action. Constitutive and regulative rules can be represented using logical algebra symbology developed by Brown(1972) and Varela (1975).

We illustrate the primitive forms of constitutive and regulative rules in figures 2 and 3.

Both meaning and entailed action are context dependent and therefore subject to change depending on the level of context in which the acts are performed.

### **Levels of context**

Levels of context are the dynamic socially-constructed realities that guide the attribution of meaning and subsequent response. The contexts emerge from the interaction of actors across multiple events between two or more companies embedded in multiple interacting systems. It is expected that multiple levels of context may exist, and therefore any act is capable of being interpreted in more than one ways. In Rules Theory terms, levels of context are hierarchically-ordered

**Figure 3. Primitive Form of a Regulative Rule**

$$rR = \frac{Actn_i}{[A \supset (Do(Actn_j))_{1-n}] \supset C}$$

Where: rR = Regulative Rule  
A = Antecedent Condition  
Do = Deontic Operator (obligatory, legitimate, prohibited, irrelevant)  
⊃ = Read "if ... then"  
Actn<sub>i</sub> = Read as "Action." A class term for specific act(s) or extended episode(s).  
Actn<sub>j</sub> = Meaningful construction of social action at a level of abstraction j higher than level i.  
C = Consequent Conditions

Source: Pearce & Cronen (1980)

**Figure 4. Levels of Context**



mutually independent frames of reference. The number and nature of these embedded levels of context depends on the nature of the interaction. Furthermore, levels of context only exist while parties are in interaction.

For this case analysis, we identified three different levels of context; 1, the Episode (the history of Tire Failures); 2, the Ford-Firestone Relationship; 3, the Car Industry; as illustrated in figure 4. Each one of these levels of context can be activated during an actor's attribution of meaning or action. Further, they are potentially reshaped as the parties exchange acts.

**Episode of Tire Failures.** Episodes are groups of acts contextualised hierarchically and temporally as wholes, which are at least nameable by subject matter. Episodes are bounded sequences of acts, with a beginning, an internal structure, and an end. An episode is a sequence of interactions that form a unit.

**Ford-Firestone Relationship.** Relationships are norms of behaviour constructed in interaction, composed of a set of episodes connecting two or more actors over time. Business-to-business relationships can be characterised by application of a contemporary taxonomy of relationship attributes, employing constructs such as trust, commitment, bonds, distance, and information sharing, amongst others.

**The Car Industry (Industrial Sector).** For business relationships, Industrial Sector is the highest level of context. This context can be thought of as being defined by a set of acceptable and unacceptable practices (norms) which guide the actions of a group of companies in a defined industrial sector. It transcends the boundaries of any single organisation and regulates its operation. Some norms are explicit, like the laws and regulations, at local or international level, and some norms are implicit like a generally accepted practice amongst entrepreneurial groups.

### **The Ford-Firestone crisis facts**

We analyse in this section the manner in which the relationship between Ford and Firestone changed as a result of the tire failure episode, as well as of other parties' acts within their extended network.

At the beginning, the parties' reactions to tire failures were as customary in the car industry whenever a faulty part was installed in cars; the car manufacturer took full responsibility, reclaimed and replaced defective parts with no involvement of, or report to, the supplier.

When in 1999 the first problems were reported after 14 fatalities occurred in Saudi Arabia, Firestone was alerted as Ford commenced replacement of the tires through a product recall.

However, not long after Ford's recall commenced, Firestone started its own tire recall beginning with 6.5 million tires and later adding a further 1.4 million tires (Jewett, 2000). Contemporary to these initial recalls, a Ford Explorer accident Texas USA left a mother of three children brain damaged and paralysed (Bowe, 2001), triggering the intervention of the NHTSA and other American authorities.

Ford and Firestone were sued together for this incident. However, Ford settled out of court agreeing to pay \$6 million, thus leaving Firestone as the sole defendant in the trial. As the death toll continued to rise, the companies confronted more legal action while sales of Ford Explorers dramatically dropped. Ford requested that Firestone withdraw Venezuelan-made tires from the market arguing those tires had one layer less and therefore did not satisfy regulations (El Universal, 2000b). Ford continued its own tire recall stressing that the new tires were Goodyear, not Firestone (El Universal, 2000a).

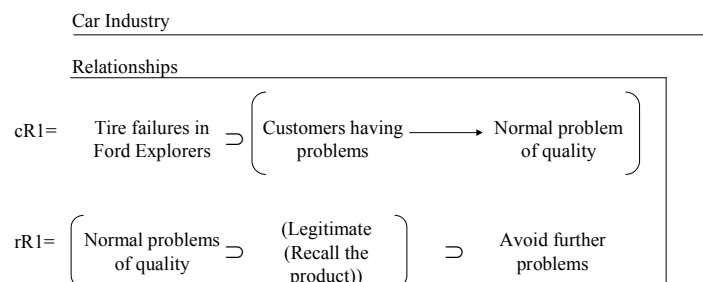
By December 2000, Firestone was blaming Ford for being 'at least partially responsible', though Ford was doing nothing to accept any responsibility. Soon after, on May 21<sup>st</sup> 2001, John Lampe, Firestone's CEO, officially terminated the almost century-old relationship with Ford (Cody & Moed, 2001). Firestone argued that Ford Explorer had more accidents than other SUVs also mounted with Firestone tires whereas Ford insisted that Firestone tires presented ten times more failures than other brands.

Blaming each other did not change the consequences; estimated costs were \$3.5 billion for Ford and a predicted total of \$10 billion combined for both companies (Late News, 2002). Ford's board of directors announced in October 2001 the company's decision to remove CEO Jacques Nasser and replace him with William Clay Ford Jr., the great-grandson of both Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone.

In 2002 the situation started to cool down as communications between Ford and Firestone began to flow, to the extent that William Clay Ford Jr. even mentioned being the great-grandson of Harvey Firestone in a Ford commercial. This act was welcomed by Firestone's John Lampe as a demonstration of Ford's honesty (Zaun, 2002).

## The dynamics of the Ford-Firestone relationship

Rules Theory can be used to analyse how the Ford-Firestone relationship evolved as the parties interacted during the crisis. We begin with the initial problems to which Ford reacted as customary by initiating a tire recall. We describe this action from Ford's perspective.

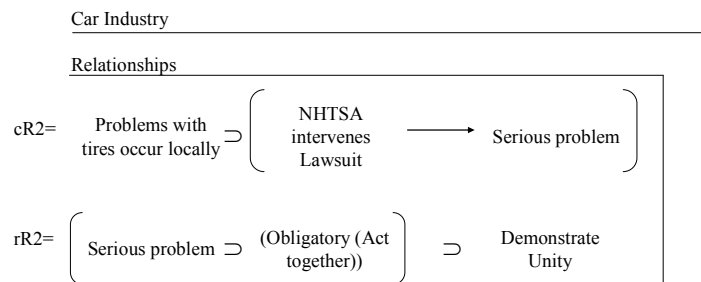




The diagram can be read as follows. The constitutive rule (cR1) applied by Ford is: in the context of the Relationship with Firestone and in the context of the Car Industry, if tires installed in some Ford Explorers fail, this counts as a normal quality problem. The regulative rule (rR1) applied by Ford is: if normal quality problems are occurring with our cars, it is legitimate to recall the product in order to avoid further problems.

Ford was fulfilling the norms of the industry as it is customary for manufacturers facing this type of problem. The Ford-Firestone relationship might not have improved but clearly had not deteriorated at that stage.

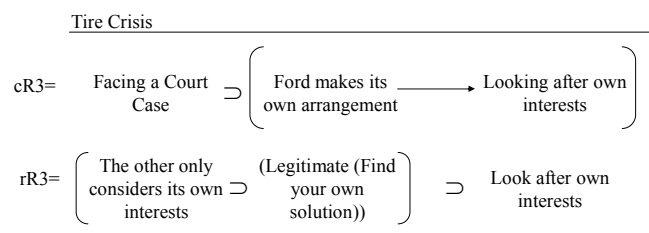
However, the problem proved to be far more complex when after a number of cases were reported in the US the NHTSA intervened ordering an investigation, whilst Ford and Firestone were involved in a court case.



This diagram can be read as follows. The constitutive rule (cR2) is: in the context of the Ford-Firestone Relationship and in the context of the Car Industry, if the tire problem becomes domestic, i.e. involves American customers, then companies face both legal problems and the intervention of the NHTSA, this counts as a serious problem. The associated regulative rule (rR2) is: if the problem turns serious, then it is obligatory to act together in order to demonstrate unity.

Thus, Ford and Firestone defended the lawsuit together, once again following the expected norms of behaviour in their Industrial Sector and within the established norms of their long term relationship.

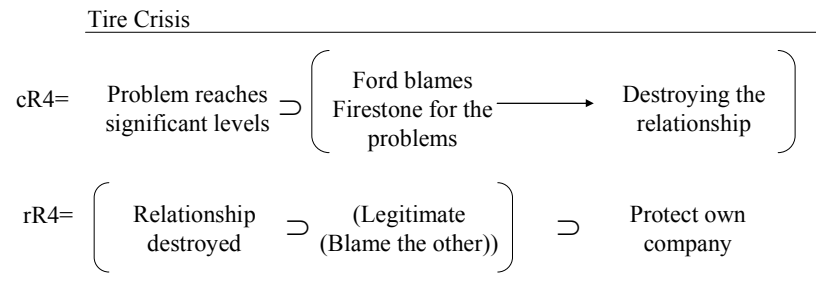
Unexpectedly, Ford announced they had settled its part of the lawsuit, leaving Firestone on their own. We note at this point that the tire crisis had gained such importance that it had become more important than the inter-company relationship, and arguably more important than the norms of the car industry. Effectively, the Episode became the most significant context guiding meaning and action between Ford and Firestone, changing the hierarchical structure from that portrayed in figure 4. Thus, the Episode became the dominant context of interaction.



The diagram above reads as follows. From Firestone's perspective the constitutive rule (cR3) is: in the context of the Tire Crisis, if Ford and Firestone are facing a joint court case and Ford settles out-of-court, this counts as them looking after their own

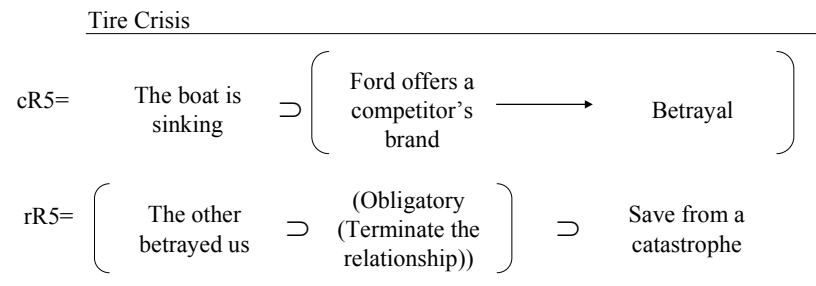
interests (not protecting the relationship). The associated regulative rule (rR3) is: if Ford looks after its own interests, then it is legitimate for us to find our own solutions, in order to look after our interests too.

This interaction appears to have damaged important features of the Ford-Firestone relationship like trust-benevolence and attitudinal as well as the performance elements of commitment. Under these new circumstances both companies started to blame each other with no regard to their relationship.



The diagram reads as follows. From Firestone’s perspective, the constitutive rule (cR4) is: in the context of the Tire Crisis, if the problem reaches critical levels of significance, and Ford blames Firestone for the problems, this counts as destroying the relationship. The associated regulative rule (rR4) is: if the relationship value is destroyed then it is legitimate to blame Ford in order to protect our company.

At this stage both companies are acting independently. Almost 100 years of joint business counted for nothing in the face of the enormous financial and reputational consequences of the problem. The boat was sinking. Ford announced their decision to replace the faulty tire with Goodyear product forcing Firestone to terminate the relationship.



The diagram can be read as follows. From Firestone’s perspective, the constitutive rule (cR5) is: in the context of the Tire Crisis, if the boat is sinking, and Ford announces they will be replacing our tires with a major competitor’s tires, this counts as a betrayal. The associated regulative rule (rR5) is: if we were betrayed, then it is obligatory to terminate the relationship in order to save us from catastrophe.

## Discussion

Using Rules Theory, we have described why the parties acted in one form or another and how they managed to justify their actions. We portrayed participants’ interaction as if they apply sets of constitutive rules through which the actions of the other are given meaning, and regulative rules through which the reaction is guided. These rules are not explicit; they are, instead, the observer’s construction on the basis of

observation of the actions and episodes. Rules are context dependent and based on previous episodes as well as on expected future outcomes of the relationship. From a relationship perspective, we adopt a constructionist approach to explain business-to-business relationships and propose that the parties co-create their reality through interaction. Each time one party does something to another, it potentially changes such reality. Business relationships simultaneously provide a context for interaction and potentially change as a consequence of such interaction. It can be argued that some features of relationships – trust, commitment, bonds, distance, for example - change more than others depending on the meaning parties give to the others' acts. Firestone's termination of the relationship illustrates this point. It can be argued that the inter-company relationship lost critical features as trust-benevolence - the belief that the other will act in a manner that is beneficial to the other (Selnes & Gønhaug, 2000), as well as a change in the motivation behind inter-company commitment, from 'we want to commit' to 'we have to' commit (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Strong social bonds formed by interpersonal relationships as well as structural bonds formed by investments that could not be retrieved (Buttle, Ahmad, & Aldaigan, 2002; Turnbull & Wilson, 1989), such as their research facilities in Brazil were not capable of stopping relationship termination.

From a network perspective, inter-company relationships do not exist in a vacuum as companies are multi-connected to other companies and as interaction in a particular dyad affects others in the extended network. This case illustrates this interconnectedness –a long-standing proposition of the IMP Group- in a number of acts. For example, Goodyear was a temporary beneficiary of the Ford-Firestone crisis. However, Goodyear was not able to sustain a relationship with Ford, because it did not have enough production capacity. Goodyear's capacity had been reduced two years before as the tire industry faced endemic financial problems. We argue that for Goodyear, its network position provided an opportunity whereas the same network restricted its capacity to take advantage of it. Although effects of acts might result from the parties' positive or negative evaluation, seeking to achieve specific effects (Ford & McDowell, 1999), the case illustrates how interconnected networks produce unintended effects.

This Episode, now finished, helped redefine norms within, and therefore, the meaning of the context, the Car Industry. Recent media comments have connected Detroit's style of purchasing, 'in which each part thinks they are clever enough to avoid the fundamental principle of risk and return' (Waddell, 2006) to the Ford-Firestone crisis. Waddell suggests that parts suppliers can no longer expect car manufacturers to be solely responsible for resolving quality problems. The lessons appear not to be forgotten. A recent news report about a Toyota product recall included comment on the Ford-Firestone crisis, which remains a public relations headache, unlike the Toyota recall which presents a customer-service opportunity (Vella, 2006).

Rules Theory helps us portray how the social reality of business relationships is dynamically constructed through interaction. Holmlund (2004) proposes that business interaction configures meaningful categories on different hierarchical levels. Sequences of acts build the context for interpretation, which in turn supplies the meaning that guides action. Thus, each time interaction takes place, the level of context in which such interaction has been performed is potentially reshaped. Then, dynamic interaction emerges. This involves: evaluating and giving meaning to the other's act and enacting a response. Meaning and response - each of these can affect the construals of relationships over time. The Ford-Firestone crisis changed the

shared norms of behaviour within the car industry to the extent that new episodes related to defective parts' recalls are immediately connected to this episode.

## A final word

This case also serves to illustrate Batonda and Perry's (2003) idea that relationships can remain dormant for a period of time. When William Clay Ford Jr. mentioned in advertising that he was the great-grandson of Harvey Firestone, Firestone's CEO John Lampe observed that it was a very honest thing to do; both the act and the meaning stimulated a revival in their relationship.

Ford currently uses Firestone in a number of their cars.

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