Never miss a beat - Balancing acts in single case research

Abstract

In this paper we discuss what “good” single case-based research means in business marketing. Based on this we express three balancing acts that we believe are particularly important for ensuring validity for a case-based researcher. These are about casing - crafting the case, communicating the case and developing theory from the case. We also develop recommendations for author-reviewer interaction to further the quality of research and we provide guidelines for qualitative researchers dealing with reviewers, with a quantitative mindset.

Introduction

In research on business marketing issues, case-based research has become particularly influential (Riege, 2003; Johnston et al 1999; Piekkari; Plakoyiannaki & Welch, 2010). B2B firms live with complexity, chaos, ambiguity, fuzzy boundaries and continuous change and research methodologies have to adjust to capture their reality (Gummesson, 2003). According to Bonoma (1985, p.202) “certain areas of interest to marketeers simply defy counting practices” as they are complex and sensitive to the context in which events unfold. Such areas include (among other areas) research on business networks, dyadic relationships, managerial decision-making, etc, where contextual sensitivity and a process focus is required (Easton, 1995; Halinen & Törnross, 2005).

Case studies seem to reflect this call for requisite variety in research methodologies and contexts well. Easton (2010, p.119) defines case studies as “a research method that involves investigating one or a small number of social entities or situations about which data are collected using multiple sources of data and developing a holistic description through an iterative research process”. Compared to other, qualitative approaches, case-based research focuses on specific events and may include and combine multiple sources of evidence through the researchers’ active theoretical framing and boundary setting of reality. The versatility and requisite variety of cases have undoubtedly contributed to making business case studies the methodology of choice for many researchers in and beyond business marketing (Dubois & Araujo, 2004). However, case study conventions vary across research disciplines (Piekkari, Welch and Paavilainen, 2009). In general, there is a strong tendency to favor multiple case studies over single case studies in the field. Multiple case studies are recommended to reach “theoretical saturation” or “maximum variation” (Perry, 1998). In line with influential writers on the case methodology in
business research (Eisenhardt, 1989, Yin, 2009) researchers who present qualitative papers based on studies with multiple cases warrant the rigor of case study strategy on multiple case studies. The underlying rationale is that case comparison help researchers detect commonalities and dependencies and thus help the process of decomposing case studies into causal relationship and bridge from these into deductive (quantitative) research (Eisenhardt & Grabhner, 2007). In a similar vein Larsson (1993) claims that the “case survey method” (defined as quantifying single case studies) “overcomes the major drawback of single case studies, namely their inability to examine cross-sectional patterns and to generalize to large populations” (cf. Larsson, 1993, p. 1517). Hence, from this perspective the valor of case studies is primarily seen in their function as a preamble to quantitative approaches. Single case studies represent an alternative case research strategy, which, rather than seeking to reduce the noisy context in the search for testable propositions, seek to embrace the uniqueness of this interplay in order to grasp more about the capabilities of the reality researched (Orton, 1997; Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). Learning from single case studies in this sense competes with comparative studies, in seeking out the particularities rather than commonalities (Stake, 2005). Whereas in the first perspective, events are seen as outcomes of specific causes and conditions, the second perspective sees realized events as possible draws from a distribution of possible events, hence a witness to the underlying capability of this reality (Tsoukas, 1989; March, Sproull & Tamuz, 1991).

The bias towards multiple case studies is also reflected in the comments received from journal reviewers, when these evaluate business marketing research based on single case studies. Here, comparative issues, sampling and other requests for making the case research more palatable for a quantitative approach are common (see also Pratt, 2008). We think this development towards quantifying qualitative research is a conundrum for case-based research. A bias towards multiple case studies constrains the breadth of research options available for business researchers. We do not argue against the use comparative case studies as a means to develop insights. Nor do we argue that single case studies should be exempt from quality criteria. We acknowledge, that single case studies are not always well performed and sometimes are groundless, needless and endless (Weick, 1979). However, we think the one-sided dominance of assumptions derived from a multiple case study approach favors a specific “boilerplate” for conducting and evaluating case-based research, which does not lend itself easily to single case studies. A boilerplate refers to an accepted template for writing up research (Pratt, 2009).

We set out to accomplish two aims with this paper: First, we argue for deploying “good” single case-based research strategies in business marketing and address the unique validity aspects of this approach. For this reason, it is not possible to reconcile around a set of shared evaluation criteria for case-based research. Based on this we elaborate on three balancing acts that we believe are particularly important for ensuring validity in case-based research. Second, and in line with Starbuck’s (2003) insights and recommendations for author-reviewer interaction to further the quality of research, we provide guidelines for qualitative researchers dealing with reviewers, with a quantitative mindset.
Single case research and validity criteria

Single case research is a research approach that is different from multiple case research in that it is not relying on comparing ‘the same’ phenomenon across a set of cases but that it permits inquiry into the nature of the phenomenon in a single case. A single case approach therefore permits reconsideration of the pre-existing assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon during the study in a fashion that is not possible by using a multiple case approach. Comparisons across cases are, by definition, not an option when the aim is to not hold on to predetermined conceptualisations pertaining to the object of study, but to develop them.

The strong focus on single case studies in business marketing is not, however, echoed in equally strong rooting of practice into the conventions in methodological literature on case-based research (Piekkari et al., 2010). Moreover, the lack of a shared notion on research quality for evaluating the rigor of qualitative research is particularly challenging for single case researchers. Central to the issue of rigor is the notion of validity and we will therefore consider how this concept is understood and how it relates to single case research.

Following the positivist research tradition, validity has come to mean the correspondence between empirical ‘facts’ (evidence) and theoretical constructs. Three forms of validity criteria are often used (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010): Construct validity, securing that correct operational measures have been established for the concepts in use. Internal validity, making sure that causal relationships have been established. External validity, proving that the domain to which a study’s findings belong can be generalised. However, the combination of these validity criteria has been found difficult (see e.g. Bonoma, 1985; Dubois and Gadde, 2014). For instance, Bonoma (1985), points at the trade off that has to be made between internal validity, or “data integrity”, and external validity since the closer the researcher gets to the object of study the more difficult it becomes to compare data across categories.

For single case research these validity criteria, generated from positivist ideals, are problematic for other reasons. First, traditional validity criteria rely on that the meanings of theoretical constructs are kept constant during a study and that they are understood in a common, or the same, way by all researchers in the research community. Second, the empirical data to be ‘collected’ in a study are assumed to be pre-defined in relation to the study. Hence, the matching of theoretical constructs and empirical observations is, according to the positivist notion of validity, a static aspect of research, i.e. something that is not related to the process of study but only to the result of it. The result, in turn, assumes a direct relation to pre-determined decisions regarding what theory to match with what empirical data, and the quality thus relate to how successful this match turns out to be. In contrast, the validity in single case studies, as the correspondence between theoretical constructs and empirical observations, is
embedded in the research process and thus also subject to change during the whole process of study. Therefore, neither the set of constructs used (or their exact meaning), nor the empirical data, based on which valid claims are to be made, are fixed or exactly defined before the ending of the study.

Validity claims are contingent on the conventions that define research traditions. We will simplify such conventions by referring to two basic categories; positivistic and interpretative (relating to single case research) in our continued discussion of how proponents of the two can interact. Next, we address three balancing acts that can be identified for single case research following from the process related validity aspects of single case studies.

Balancing acts in ensuring research quality in single case studies

Based on the notion that validity for single case research is about matching of theory and empirical data and that this matching is concerned with the process of research we point at three issues that the single case researcher has to deal with, and suggest three balancing acts relating to these issues. We prefer the metaphor of a balancing act because they all contain an element of reconciling interests and priorities which opposes each other, and where researchers in each case must negotiate their own way between the Scylla of methodological objectivism and the Charybdis of subjectivist realism. We contend that single case study researchers will be challenged by these three dilemmas in some form at some point in their research. However, the manifestation of these issues and the dilemmas they present will take on different forms in each project and so will the strategies for dealing with these tensions. In our approach, we differ from for instance Riege (2003) and Yin (2009) in the search for a design or blueprint for conducting and writing up single case studies. We believe such a design is potentially constraining the research activities. Rather than a recipe, and more in alignment with the notion of a journey into an unknown territory, we would like to offer an operative overview of the dilemmas researcher will face when conducting single case studies.

Crafting the case – casing

Single case research permits interaction between theory and empirical data. In 1992, Ragin introduced “casing” as the activity of transforming empirical material into a meaningful case, encouraging case researchers to constantly ask: what is the case a case of? Developing empirical data into a case is suggested to be a process and therefore cases “must be found because they cannot be specified beforehand” (Ragin, 1992, p. 220). Ragin (1992) is also clear on that the primary goal for researchers is to link the empirical and the theoretical, and that casing is essential in the process of forming meaningful descriptions of the empirical reality. In a similar vein, Dubois and Gadde (2002) suggest “systematic combining” as the process of interaction between theory and empirical data and describe it as nonlinear and path-dependent. Theory cannot be understood without empirical observations, and the empirical observations cannot be properly understood without theory. The goal is matching of theory and reality.
and matching is “about going back and forth between framework, data sources and analysis” (ibid, p. 556).

Systematic combining is described as a process involving a number of ‘directions’ and ‘redirections’, which are necessary to achieve matching between theory and empirical data. ‘Directions’ relate to phases in the process wherein the current theoretical ideas guide the data collection, while ‘redirections’ are spurred by changes of different kinds e.g. regarding the meaning and choice of theoretical concepts and what additional data is needed in adjusting to such modifications of theoretical ideas, or regarding effects of ‘following the data’, or story, if this takes ‘new’ directions. Most of these redirections require choices or decisions to be made, for example with regard to how to expand the empirical study in time and/or scope, or how to focus with regard to theoretical concepts, choices with regard to data collection such as which interviewees from which organizational units, number of interviews etc. Some choices are always made ex ante – which may resemble other research approaches, while other choices come during the research process and are made based on the situation of the researcher and the case study at that time. In making those choices, the context of the researcher plays a role since the researcher interacts with other researchers in the process of casing.

The research idea is therefore subject to development throughout the study as an effect of learning and the emergent features of the case itself – both the empirical aspects of it and also how it evolves as a result from a growing understanding from the perspective of the researcher. Hence, the starting point as articulated in the initial research ideas for a single case study may not be of any particular relevance (for the reader) at the end of the study.

Utilising the ‘flexibility’ of single case studies in this regard is in conflict with positivist research ideals. For instance, Yin (2012, p. 54) states that if the initial proposition must be revised it has to be ‘retested’ with another set of cases. In single case research based on ‘casing’ or ‘systematic combining’, the research idea is subject to development throughout the study as an effect of learning and the emergent features of the case itself – both the empirical aspects of it and also how it evolves as a result from a growing theoretical understanding of the research phenomenon from the perspective of the researcher. Hence, the starting point articulated as initial research ideas for a single case study may not be of any particular relevance for the reader of the eventual case. Single case studies can thus be seen as having an ‘arbitrary starting point’ in initial research ideas involving certain theoretical concepts and entry points in a case ‘to be’ (Dubois and Araujo, 2004).

The ending of a case study can also be considered as ‘arbitrary’ in some sense. Expanding the boundaries of a case in one or several directions, e.g. in time or scope of the network, always has consequences for the theory developed (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). How to ‘package’ the study in relation to the issue of arbitrariness is therefore something that the researcher has to deal with when publishing the result of single case research.
The balancing act when it comes to single case research in view of the nature of the casing process relates to how the issue of arbitrariness is handled by the researcher. In view of traditional positivistic research ideals it might be tempting not to deal with emergent needs for redirecting a case study but instead to ‘settle’ with current ‘findings’ although the researcher have come to realise that the initial assumptions and research ideas were ‘wrong’. At the other end, the researcher may take the arbitrariness too far by not daring to suggest any conclusions but instead suggesting continued research and expansion of the study in every direction identified as interesting. Hence, a balance must be found between what we may call ‘premature lock-in situations’ and ‘endless data rides’.

*Communicating the case and the casing*

There are also research quality aspects to be considered when communicating case studies in journal papers: the case study design, the research process and the researcher’s context. As discussed above, the starting point articulated as initial research ideas for a single case study may not be of particular relevance for the reader of the eventual case although the description of the research process as such is of importance. Identifying and explaining crucial choices made during the research process is one way of ensuring transparency of the research (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010; Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010). This has to do with “openness” (Dubois and Araujo, 2007) with regard to the interaction between theory and empirical data: “the intellectual journey needs description and reflection” (ibid., p. 178) in order to convince the reader of the theoretical and empirical grounding of the case study. This kind of reflexivity with regard to reporting the methodological aspects of a case study is also emphasised by Piekkari et al. (2010). Hence, the methodological reporting needs to account for the process of research and the key choices made in it.

However, it is not only how to account for the process that is an issue in communicating single case research; it also concerns the richness and complexity of the case itself. While richness and complexity are indeed virtues of single case research these features may also be a burden (Kvale 1997). On the one hand, including too much detail and context may obscure the theoretical suggestions. On the other hand, too far driven ‘streamlining’ of the case requires that contextual details are taken out of the case and may as a result entail the risk of over-simplifying the case.

We suggest that this issue of selectivity concerns both the casing process and the case itself. When the casing is concerned the balancing is a matter of how detailed the ‘dwindling road’ should be accounted for: How much context of the process should be included and how? In reality, we suspect that ‘linear process accounts’ given by some researchers as if they ‘managed’ to hold on to the initial research ideas is more of an abdication to mainstream research traditions than ‘true’ accounts of how the research was actually carried out. On the other hand, too much detail including all kinds of fruitless efforts, which are natural parts of the ‘actual’ casing process and that the researcher has left behind, may not contribute to convince any reader of the ‘validity’ of the results of the research.
The journal format does not provide much room for detail. Most single case researchers feel restrained by the limited space available. The issue of selectivity is therefore as much a matter of structuring the selected parts of the case and the process to make it accessible and convincing to the reader, while at the same time retain as much of the contextual reality of the case as possible. Single-case researchers must negotiate this dilemma in the best way possible. Strong-arming a case into the mould of a linear paper format can produce a different paper altogether, while disregarding the journal format may harm publication possibilities. Since single-case based papers primarily are read and remembered for their convincing stories, we probably lean more towards structuring around the story to be told than seeking to fit into a particular format.

**Developing theory from the case**

Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) stress the need for theories to demonstrate both novelty and continuity. Concepts may be given new meaning (inherent or contextual) but need at the same time to be connected to, or grounded in, ‘received’ literature so that they can be understood by other researchers. A single case study can be critically accused for being “just an example” and to some extent a case always is. A more interesting way of formulating a relevant question to a single case researcher would be to ask “what is this case a case of?” referring back to the key question of Ragin (1992). Another critical, or rather irrelevant, question is how you can generalize from a study of only one instance? Single case research is never generalizable to a population but it can develop theory that can be used and further developed in contexts beyond the empirical context of the single case. Easton (2010) uses critical realism as a philosophical foundation to explain how case research through the nature of the involved entities, how they act and the variety of mechanisms through which they utilize powers. However, as pointed out by several other authors, inability to generalize does not automatically mean inability to learn from single case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006; March, Sproull & Tamuz, 1991).

Based on the depth of a study of a phenomenon in a certain context a single case can capture and suggest explanations for interdependencies and interactions within the particular context. Single case researchers need to make use of this uniqueness by crafting the case and matching it with the emerging theoretical framework to make sense of the empirical data to develop theory. Developing theory based on single case research provides the researcher with rich opportunities to ground the meaning of concepts in the empirical data, but this strength is directly connected to the potential weakness of making the theory too case specific. The specificity in relation to the case and the generalizability that can be achieved by relating the findings to received conceptual definitions and meanings therefore becomes a balancing act. This balancing act relates to the issue of theoretical/analytical generalisation and is thus a key aspect of the way theory can convincingly be developed based on single case research. The issue stems from the need to demonstrate how the developed theory is grounded both in empirical data and in ‘received’ theory. A challenge for the researcher may be to separate the ‘received’ from the novel meanings of the theory, since the researcher has been integrated in the process of theory development. Using
colleagues and reviewers as ‘sparring partners’ to sort the novel from the ‘received’ and to link them is one way of dealing with this issue. We turn to the particular challenge of interacting with reviewers in the next section.

**Positivist review comments on case based research (and how to approach them)**

In this section we follow up on the balancing acts in addressing general review comments that are particularly difficult to deal with for case researchers. Standards for qualitative research is indeed strongly influenced by reviewers: not only through processes of censoring what is published, but deeper and more profoundly in setting the standards for future researchers, who use published research as templates for crafting their own research designs. Pratt (2009) polled a group of over 100 researchers with qualitative studies published in top tier US-based management journals on their publishing experience, including interaction with reviewers. Pratt notes that most authors point to the lack of training in as well as ignorance of the value of qualitative methods by reviewers. Clearly this is a problem, that we recognize and that we – as many other qualitative researchers – focus on when we discuss review experience. However, rather than digging the trenches deeper between quantitative and qualitative research (or in our case multiple versus single based case research) or try to reconcile qualitative and quantitative research protocols, we believe in the possibility of multiple case research practices can co-exist and that ignorance towards the unique qualities of single-based case studies is not necessarily the same as lack of willingness to see their potential benefits. Even single case researchers agree that the criteria for evaluating the quality of a case-based research are unclear (Stake, 2005). We are sympathetic to Starbuck's constructive point, that we must acknowledge the virtues of the double-blind peer-review system, even when we fundamentally disagree with the people reviewing us. Critical questions contributes to furthering research and that - rather than viewing reviewers from other research traditions as ignorant - authors should see reviewers as dedicated readers of their manuscripts, who ask questions other readers will raise as well. Rather than dismiss these viewpoints we should try to anticipate what may be raised and craft arguments that may help convincing why a specific research strategy has been chosen and what purpose it serves (Starbuck, 2003). Pratt (2008 & 2009) makes the observation that several strategies can be pursued by qualitative researchers in order to be accepted by reviewers with a quantitative mind-set.

The first strategy is to make the manuscript appear as a quantitative paper: mimic their structure, language and/or criteria, along the lines of what also Sutton (1997) alluded to when discussing closet research. Similarly, adopting wordings from quantitative research like sampling (assuming an underlying population) and the use of concepts such as “analytical” generalization are quite often seen in “Quant-qual” papers. For instance, sampling an “extreme” case suggests that something is an ‘outlier’, far away from an assumed mean, hence nodding to an underlying notion of an ontology where reality is describable
through means of normal distributions. Gibbert & Ruigrok (2010) provides several examples of this notion.

The second strategy is to work for including more reviewers and editors trained in qualitative methods on the review and editorial boards of journals in the field. We suggest a third strategy, which concerns, in line with Starbuck's points (2003), to provide a primer to single case based researchers on how an argumentative approach can be used to what we see as “typical” review comments made by a positivist reviewer. These comments are also to a large degree reflecting the typical journal paper structure with its inherent assumptions on the process of research. We have developed this primer from several sources. One is the points mentioned already by researchers such as Pratt (2008), Gephardt (2004) and Bansal & Corley (2012). In addition, we draw on our own experience from interacting with journal reviewers. We have shaped our arguments around five points we believe are important for authors interacting with reviewers with a quantitative mind-set. Hence, we suggest that authors of qualitative papers meeting comments in these directions try to engage their reviewers in a dialogue concerning the appropriateness of their procedure,

*Questioning researcher bias*

The case data did seem to neatly validate the strategy-as-wayfaring approach; however, could this simply be a case of a hammer finding nails? At present, it is impossible to know the answer to this question

[Quote from reviewer report]

When reviewing case-based research, reviewers with a quantitative mind-set frequently raise the issue of researcher bias and to what extent this is controlled for in order not to “contaminate” when interpreting the research findings. Although no type of data speaks for itself and all research has an interpretive element, this is frequently raised as an important point with respect to the lack of transparency in reaching research results pointed out repeatedly also by qualitative researchers (Silverman 2005, Miles & Huberman, 2004). Self-deception is an issue in all types of research. Qualitative researchers may experience an inability to acknowledge particular data and be accused for cherry picking their data deliberately or through a process of self-deception (Salner, 1999). A famous case is Margaret Mead’s study of adolescent behaviour at the Samoa Island, which came out with rather surprising conclusions (for their time) and was later refuted by other anthropological studies. The deception of this qualitative researcher was later ascribed to two mechanisms: 1) she was being played by her informants but 2) also led astray by her own strong theoretical convictions with respect to the role culture plays (Freeman, 1983). However, as Silverman (2005) also points out, the discussion of bias does not acknowledge that qualitative research is incompatible with the notion that empirical facts can be separated from the theoretical perspective they are recognized within (see Weick, 1979 for a similar point). In other words, interpretivist researchers believe that humans actively bracket and conceptualize reality through concepts, and this process is inseparable from reality. In line with Gummessons’ (2003) point that all research has an element of interpretation and that this element assumes a researcher actively selecting and crafting a narrative from data, abductive researchers have coined a concept known as the inference to the best
When responding to reviewers raising the issue of researcher bias, there are two important issues that tend to entangle themselves, which needs to be addressed and which might open up for a dialogue. First, in single case studies, researchers need to explicate to reviewers and other readers how they ground their stories in observations made. Perhaps they need to do this in an even more detailed matter when submitting papers for review than what eventually will end up in the paper, since careful reviewers might call for the extra deep insight (Pratt, 2008; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). Second, in single case studies “contamination” should be embraced as this is the only way to gain the contextualist perspective ingrained in the study. Direct observation and interaction provides insights which are not possible from a distance. Rather than avoiding contamination and subjectivity, the point is to acknowledge and develop enough theoretical capacity to reflect upon it theoretically. Deep involvement combined with broad theoretical lenses breed diversity of insights and lead researchers to have a broader pool of convincing stories to select from when presenting findings (Andersen & Kragh, 2010). As pointed out by a quantitative researcher such as Campbell (1967): “Case based research may provide messy data, but it is a price that must be paid for deepness in observation” (see Bansal & Corey 2012 for a similar point). Since no-one enters a research site without some ideas of what to find, there is no such thing as an objective mind, when conducting qualitative research and interaction with subjects are needed. Glaser and Strauss point this out well (1967, p. 253): “No sociologist can possibly erase from his mind all the theory he knows before he begins his research. Indeed the trick is to line up what one takes as theoretical possible”. In single case research, interaction often unfolds over time and as the researcher learns more about the actors and contexts they deliberately let themselves be influenced by the context they work with. This immersion in the field is part of the specific value attributed with single-case research. This also means that case selection criteria that may have been important in the initial stages of research are altered as the researcher untangles the case and a more profound understanding emerges. Clearly, based on their findings, researchers will therefore also “pick the cherries” that lend support to their observations. This links back to the balancing acts.

**Questioning the choice of case for a single case study**

Use of a single case could be justified better in relation to the research question. Limitations set by these choices need to be discussed either in methodology part of or in the end of the paper.

Why Truck Inc.? What sorts of positions do the 11 interviewees hold? What was the sampling approach to gaining access to the interviewees?

First of all, why does this particular case provide a useful context within which to study strategic wayfaring? Did you conduct any theoretical sampling?

[Quotes from reviewer reports]
Researchers which deploy a quantitative mind-set reviewing a single-case based study might be particularly questioning the selection criteria for a particular case. The question typically raised is: why was this particular case chosen to convey this point? Single case study researchers often struggle with this question, because they do not realize the underlying assumption made by the reviewer, that the case was selected to develop a particular theoretical perspective. However, the role of theory in a single case based study differs strongly from that of a multiple case-based, where the aim is to test or further expand upon a body of theory. Qualitative researchers of single case studies are primarily using theory as sense-making devices (Andersen & Kragh, 2011). For this reason cases are not selected for demonstrating an example, but through the researchers’ interaction with the case, it reveals certain interesting aspects that may provide interesting points to an ongoing theoretical course. Crafting that conversation to make it interesting and relevant for a theoretical audience is the important required skill. The important discussion for the reviewer is therefore whether and to what extent a rigorous and revealing scrutiny of the case is possible for interesting and novel insights to appear that also have bearing on the theoretical conversation. In other words, whether the case study reveals something which is both novel and contributing to theory.

*Questioning the amount of data*

The methodological description is weak. The whole data collection process is unclear; the authors should provide a more coherent and organized (and better detailed) account of their research design, sampling rationale, data collection (respondents’ description) and data analysis

[Quote from reviewer report]

A related concern raised by the researcher with a quantitative mind-set concerns the volume of data used in developing insights from case-based research. The equivalent to a large sample in quantitative research is the quest for data “richness” or “thickness”. In case-based research, published in top-tier marketing journals, it is not uncommon to find data accounts, which in number of interviews or observations can measure themselves with the sample sizes found in quantitative studies (Penaloza, 2000, ). This focus on the size of the data pile links back to quantitative research norms, where tests of significance calls for some amount of data. However, one has to keep in mind (and possibly argue for in the response to the reviewer) that the intended product of research is to develop new insights, not to provide a test of these insights. While rigor in research and data richness also can be an important provider of detail and can be a source of inspiration, data amounts are not in themselves providing better insights (Sutton, 1997). The quality of insights depend less on data heaps than on the rigor of the analytical process carried out by the researcher (Weick, 1989). Often, genuinely surprising insights come to the fore when researchers are off guard. They experience history richly, through detailed and meticulous scrutiny (March, Sproull & Tamuz, 1991) or as sidekicks when engaging in informal conversation or doing something else perhaps in the vicinity of but not directly related to the case study (Sutton, 1997).

*Asking for ex post rationalisation*
This chapter contains all the necessary references to provide a platform for the methodology. However, there is a lack of description of how the references are actually used to construct the research design and undertake the case study. More emphasis on how the authors have performed the work would increase the quality.

[Quote from reviewer report]

When reviewers cannot find explicit accounts of clearly articulated (ex ante) research questions or propositions (e.g. Yin, 2009) they often ask for clarification. Some may see the lack of a precise research question as a clear sign of the lack of rigor on behalf of the researcher, and warrant their rejection of the paper based on a missing research question. However, when reporting findings from an open-ended single case study, the interesting result to report back may in fact be the formulation of a specific and surprising research question that challenges conventional beliefs and denies assumptions of audiences (Davis, 1971). Stating a clear research question in the front end may therefore be awkward. This is related to the problems of fitting to the linear structure of a paper that follow the typical quantitative journal paper template. There are two ways for the researcher to approach such comments. The author may either try to satisfy the reviewer by articulating research questions that matches the conclusions of the paper, or try to explain how the case study evolved into the insights presented in the end of the paper. While the first approach can be the most successful in convincing the (positivist) reviewer, the second may (not just as a response to the reviewer but as part of the method section) be a better way to promote case based research and to encourage continuous advances in the ways in which case study methods are accounted for (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). In particular, since the latter may elucidate the points that the researcher wants to make. Take as an example, Lisa Peñaloza's (2000) study of the commodification of the American West, published in Journal of Marketing. The point she brings forward in this paper is that trade shows, contrary to conventional belief fulfil other functions than promoting services and products. It is also a rich historical legacy for the American cattle industry and an identity creator for those involved in the trade show “caravan”. In presenting her points for the journal format, she “investigates marketers’ processes of producing cultural meanings at the National Western Stock Show and Rodeo” (p.82). She does not formulate a research question, since this would not capture the essence of her explorative quest – nor would it convey very well her learning points.

Assuming linear process accounts
If “this study focuses on customer involvement from the perspective of the supplier”, can the authors state this very clearly up front!

[Quote from reviewer report]

A general challenge in publishing case based journal papers resides in the traditional structure, as the sequence of sections, in a typical journal paper, following the quantitative boilerplate. This sequence reflects the positivist research process that begins with a background, continues with the aim, framework, method, case, analysis and conclusions. Quantitative studies typically require that variables are ex ante identified, operationalized, measured and coded before data collection commences. For case researchers for whom
these ‘stages’ have been intertwined during the research process it is a challenge to sort the theoretical parts introduced before and after the case description. Especially the framework that typically evolves from the study is difficult to separate from the analysis and conclusions of the case study. Very seldom case based researchers succeed in alternative structuring of their papers in order to better account of the ‘real’ sequence of their research processes. Such efforts may be fruitless also since no other (linear) sequence may reflect the interactive process any better. For this reason, explaining what goes in which section of a journal contribution is not a simple matter, but requires iterative combining or zipping between data and theory. Consequently, researchers tend to present their research in either an inductive or deductive rhetoric (Orton, 1997; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The reviewers’ attention may be captured and a dialogue can potentially be opened by referring to the point made by Bansai & Corley (2012): The front end of a single case-based study serves other functions than in the typical “quant” or multiple case-based paper: It must not only hook the reader and expose an important gap in the ongoing academic discussion, but also provide a framework for the case that follow and a springboard for the insights emerging from the case. A too revealing literature review will not make the reader able to follow the discovery process through reading the case and a too secretive front-end leaves too many questions open for the reader. Likewise, the back end of a manuscript based on single case studies will often contain an elaborate discussion of what has been learned: In particular how findings from the study links to, extends, challenges or in other ways influences current theory.

**Implications**

**Concluding discussion**

In this contribution, we have argued for the quality of single case research in marketing and particular process issues with respect to producing “good” single case research. Validity claims could either be ignored on the basis of that the validity concept is inherited from traditional positivistic research ideals or be used as a term for how well a study has coped with the matching of theory with empirical data. This matching and the process, through which it is achieved, however, are associated with particular challenges for single case researchers. We have identified three issues that have to be dealt with; the issue of arbitrariness, the issue of selectivity and the issue of theoretical generalisation. We furthermore suggest that these issues present the single case researcher with three related balancing acts among contradicting forces that are emanating from the process features of making a single case study, i.e. the actual casing. While this process is characterised by the researcher’s interaction with theory and empirical ‘subjects’, the interaction between the researcher and reviewers takes on other challenges. We have elaborated on this interaction in relation to the identified balancing acts and pointed to the possibilities it presents with regard to improvements of case based papers. ‘Typical’ review comments have been used as examples on how dialogues with reviewers can be tackled. We conclude that the dialogue itself may contribute to improvements in research quality since the single case researcher’s understanding of its research subject and of theory, used as sense-making devices during the process, is never constant during the casing. The researcher may thus lack ‘the distance’ required to single out and present the novel theoretical ideas including how much and which data to select.
to convey them. However, we also see potentials in advancing the method semantics and general understanding of the different ways to conduct case based research. Great numbers of data, interviews or cases do not guarantee great research; neither do ex post rationalisations or linear accounts of messy processes.

Ideally, the quality of the single case study is the ability of an unfolding reality to shape research designs rather than the other way around, as the case researcher traverses the reality and learns from the process. Never to miss a beat, not to hesitate or stop the process of understanding what is really going on, because reality escapes predefined theoretical frameworks or data collection designs. Case studies must allow researchers to grasp and convey central elements of the meaning-creating activities of actors in context and help us understand the world from the perspective of those living in it. In our view a unique quality of in-depth single case studies is precisely the ability to follow suit to the beats of reality. This is a quality which they do not share with any other research strategy, including multiple case designs, which have comparability of a predefined issue as a priority. Such case studies do not surface and present themselves to researchers in a cut-and-dried fashion. Rather, they are actively recognized and theoretically framed by researchers. However, they are also hard to bring into the light and attention of a research community. They may lead to endless data rides and are frustrating in their unwillingness to bend into prior made decisions concerning relevant theoretical perspectives, data collection, etc.

We think that the balancing acts we have developed here may be helpful for these researchers as they engage with the reality they study, as well as for reviewers seeking also to avoid missing out on a truly insightful case story.

We have drawn on our own experience as authors of case based research and we believe that our findings can be transferred to other specialisations in business research. Although marketing research has a distinct history and has co-evolved with the marketing field, we anticipate that others fields within strategy, management and organisation share evolutionary traits as well as theoretical influences.

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