

Exploring the link between information sharing and customer attractiveness: A retail case study

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William Newell

Business to Business Marketing Management Group
School of Business & Social Science, Aarhus University
Bartholins Allé 10, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
Email: win@badm.au.dk

Business-to-business studies have frequently been interested on the role of knowledge within the interactions of firms, and how knowledge and information are shared throughout supply networks to develop closer inter-firm relationships. This paper explores how and why the sharing of market-specific loyalty card information between retailer and suppliers affects the attractiveness of the retailer. Customer attractiveness has recently received increased attention in the academic literature, yet extant research has not dealt with information and information sharing processes as attractiveness components. Specifically, information sharing is explored in depth as an element of customer attractiveness. It is also the first study to explore this research topic in the retail sector. This study focuses on the case of a large UK-based retailer and its suppliers. The retailer has one of the most widely used loyalty cards in the UK, and provides customized information to its suppliers based on the accumulated data. Data were collected through 8 semi-structured interviews with managers from both retailer and supplier firms, observational data, and analysis of over 650 pages of company materials. Through an analysis of rewards and costs of the informational exchange the main findings indicate that information sharing projects affect customer attractiveness through both the *output* of each project and through the inherent *process*. Furthermore, the output of a successful project acts as an input to high-level inter-firm business plans, contributing to the overall attractiveness of the retail firm compared to alternative retailers.

Keywords: Customer attractiveness, information sharing, B2B marketing, retail, loyalty card data.

INTRODUCTION

Business to business studies have frequently been interested on the relationship between knowledge and interactions of firms (La Rocca and Snehota, 2011, Håkansson et al., 2009). One aspect of managing these relationships involves sharing information between partners in the supply network. In the retail setting, information sharing occurs through activities such as Efficient Customer Response (ECR) (Corsten & Kumar, 2005), Vendor Managed Inventory (Kulp, Lee, & Ofek, 2004) and sharing data collected through customer loyalty cards (Finne & Sivonen, 2008). Although many studies have addressed the potential benefits of sharing loyalty card information across the supply chain, retailers often do not share this data through fear of the loss of competitive advantage or fear of opportunistic behavior from the supplier (Mohtadi and Kinsey, 2005). To help address this dilemma, this study focuses on how information sharing may improve the attractiveness of the retailer.

Developing a good supplier base requires that a buying firm show commitment to a relationship, and make itself an attractive customer (Galt and Dale, 1991). Customer attractiveness is an alternate supply management strategy which involves influencing the highest quality suppliers to voluntarily do business with the buying firm, rather than employing more traditional coercive means (Ellegaard, Johansen, & Drejer, 2003). Attractiveness has been linked to trust and commitment (Halinen, 1996) and to receiving preferred treatment from suppliers (Hüttinger, Schiele, & Veldman, 2012). Despite this research, a continuing managerial challenge is to find the mechanisms that provide the right combination of perceived benefits, trust and dependence that create perceived customer attractiveness (Hald et al., 2009).

This research is focused on how and why information sharing between retailers and suppliers can lead to increased customer attractiveness in the B2B context. This study will contribute to the concept of customer attractiveness by exploring the conceptual link with retail-supplier information sharing. This will add to the understanding of customer attractiveness, while also providing concrete mechanisms for managerial practice. Moreover, this study will consider both the results of information sharing, along with the related process. To this researcher's knowledge this study is the first to explore this link, while exclusively considering information sharing as a specific element. More specifically, the research question is as follows:

RQ: How do loyalty card-based consumer information sharing projects contribute to the perception of customer attractiveness within the retailer-supplier relationship?

This study will begin with a literature review of customer attractiveness, followed by an explanation of the conceptual link with information sharing within supply chains. A brief review of other known benefits, setbacks and barriers to information sharing will also be presented. The methodology and case study background are presented before moving on to the case study findings. Finally, a concluding discussion and outline of this study's limitations will summarize the main contributions of the study along with what may be improved for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Exchange Theory

The majority of studies in the area of customer attractiveness employ Social Exchange Theory (SET) as a theoretical foundation (Hüttinger et al., 2012). This theory generally involves the exchange of resources within relationships (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Exchange theory states that parties will evaluate a relationship based on both past experiences and future expectations of costs, risks and potential benefits from which it results (Blau, 1964). Parties then compare the expected outcomes against alternative parties. The comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt}) is the lowest level of acceptable outcomes with respect to available alternative relationships (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). SET involves social interpersonal interaction which over time may develop social and economic outcomes, leading to trust and commitment (Lambe et al., 2001).

Theories in social psychology have provided the basis for many B2B studies, including those that involved comparisons to mating (Wilkinson et al., 2005) and relating business relationships to the relationship development between husbands and wives (Dwyer et al., 1987). Both comparisons emphasize the importance of a mutual liking at the outset of a partnership, however attraction is a concept that must also be managed throughout the life cycle of a romantic relationship. Often an attractive outside partner has been found to be a principal factor leading to a breakup or termination of an established relationship (Buunk, 1987). In the industrial buying context, Bonoma and Johnston (1978) contend that many industrial buying decisions are based on social rather than rational economic factors. While SET and such analogies have provided a useful background for B2B studies, care must be taken in order to consider other characteristics of organizational dynamics (Blois, 2003).

Customer Attractiveness

Customer attractiveness is framed as an alternative way of thinking for buying managers. Normative buyer-seller relationships generally involve the seller who must tailor products and services to the customer, and take the initiative to engage in a business relationship with that buyer. This is arguably the case in practice throughout many situations, especially with very large retail clients who are key accounts for highly dependent suppliers (Hofer et al., 2012). Customer attractiveness alters this view by shifting the initiative to the buyer, who will try to attract and retain the resources of strategic suppliers (Ellegaard et al., 2003). Focusing this initiative on the buyer has been referred to as reverse marketing (Blenkhorn and Banting, 1991), yet this term in particular does not rely on theories in social psychology.

Arguably if buyers can better understand what makes them an attractive customer, they can improve their likelihood to become that supplier's preferred customer (Nollet et al., 2012). Preferred customer status facilitates the influence of suppliers to allocate more resources specifically to the partnership (Ellegaard et al., 2003, Baxter, 2012, Ellis et al., 2012). Transaction specific investments in the relationship often lead to increased relationship

commitment (Rusbult, 1983). Mutual transaction-specific investments towards collecting, processing and sharing information potentially lead to a further increase in the amount of strategic information shared between both parties (Frazier et al., 2009). This would likely reinforce a cyclical pattern of attractiveness, and thus further positive relationship development (Ellegaard, 2012). This also begs the question as to what exactly constitutes an antecedent or driver to customer attractiveness, which would give some insight into the spark that ignites the revolution of this cycle.

Academic studies have been increasingly focused on the antecedents and definitions of customer attractiveness over the past decade. Much like social psychologists' lack of agreed definition of "attraction" (Berscheid and Walster, 1978), no consensus has been reached on a definition of customer attractiveness (Ellegaard, 2012). Multiple definitions have been suggested in B2B studies through the consideration of a variety of different levels of analysis (Mortensen, 2012). Levels of analysis range from attraction between companies, attraction between groups of individuals or attraction between individual boundary spanners within an organization (Mortensen et al., 2008). A range of definitions of customer attractiveness, and studies employing the term can be found in Table 1. Among this review of definitions, only one study considered information sharing related to attractiveness. This study listed information sharing as a antecedent to supplier satisfaction (Ramsay and Wagner, 2009).

A further debate concerns the stage of the B2B relationship where customer attractiveness is prominent, and needed for the relationship to improve. Dwyer et al. (1987) suggest that the need to manage one's attractiveness is important throughout all stages of a relationship between two organizations, from awareness to potential dissolution. Mortensen et al. (2008) present a matureness model of attractiveness which highlights that as a partnership matures and becomes increasingly complex, the means by which a customer establishes its own attractiveness changes. Research has also suggested that a party's *ex ante* attraction towards a customer focuses on the customer size, market share and customer risk factors (Hüttinger et al., 2012). Hüttinger et al. (2012) subsequently observe that the relationship progresses, social and technological factors play an increasing role in customer attractiveness. Attractiveness appears to play a role in starting a business relationship, while also determining the likelihood of a supplier to remain in the relationship (Moon and Bonney, 2007). Attractiveness also encourages a supplier to maintain and improve existing relationships through relational specific investments (Tóth et al., 2014). Attractiveness is generally discussed as future expectations influencing current behaviours (Hüttinger et al., 2012, Mortensen et al., 2008, Fiocca, 1982).

Table 1: Definitions and uses of attractiveness in B2B studies

Authors	Definition/Use
(Dwyer et al., 1987)	Attraction is a mechanism used to initiate a relationship until mutual trust is developed. They define attraction as “the degree to which buyer and seller achieve – in their interaction with each other – a reward-cost outcome in excess of some minimum level (C_{alt}). Rewards are derived from the tangible and intangible gratifications of association; cost includes money (money and inconvenience) or social deterrents.” (pg. 16)
(Anderson et al., 1994)	Attractiveness and network identity refer to how firms perceive themselves in a network and how others perceive them. This perception is affected by resource-transferability, activity complementarity, actor-relation generalizability.
(Halinen, 1996)	“...a company’s interest in exchanging with another based on the economic and social reward-cost outcome expected from the relationship over time.” (pg. 59)
(Harris et al., 2003)	“The extent to which relational partners perceive past, current, future or potential partners as professionally appealing in terms of their ability to provide superior economic benefits, access to important resources, and social compatibility.” (pg 12)
(Ellegaard et al., 2003)	The ability for industrial customers to become and stay attractive to its suppliers. “Attractiveness is about recognizing and understanding the specifics of the buyer supplier relation and set up attractiveness according to these specifics”. (pg. 354)
(Wilkinson et al., 2005)	Attraction is related to business relationship development, which they refer to as “business mating”. Argued that firms seek relationships with those geographically, socially, physically close, to those who show characteristics of competitive fitness. These characteristics vary in each context; sometimes complementarity is preferred, sometimes similarity is preferred.
(Ramsay and Wagner, 2009)	The greater the value added by a buyer for a supplier, the more likely the supplier will 1) choose and maintain that buyer as a customer and 2) respond quickly and more enthusiastically to recommendations from the buyer. These sources of supplier value vary across many companies due to size, product type, relative size of the supplier, customer type etc.
(Hald et al., 2009)	A party’s attraction as a function of: P(expected value); P(trust); P(dependence). Defined as “the force fostering voluntarism in purchasing and marketing exchange, and further pushing a buyer and supplier closer together in a mutually advantageous relationship.” (p 968)
(Rocca et al., 2012)	“...a supplier’s assessment of a customer, made on the basis of anticipated outcomes arising from customer-supplier interaction within a relationship.” (pg. 1244) Attractiveness is composed of the development potential, the intimacy, the relational fit and the profitability.
(Schiele et al., 2012)	“A customer is perceived as attractive by a supplier if the supplier in question has a positive expectation towards the relationship with this customer. The conditions for this perception of the supplier include an awareness of the existence of the customer and knowledge of the customer’s needs.” (pg. 1180)
(Tóth et al., 2014)	Introduces relational attractiveness of the customer (RAC) “an attitude of the supplier towards the customer firm, which encapsulates previous experiences and especially future expectations with the supplier; therefore RAC incentivizes the supplier to maintain and/or improve an existing business relationship with the customer by investing in the business relationship.”

As an indication of the maturity of the customer attractiveness concept, one might consider the prominent methodologies chosen by scholars in the field. Many of the above definitions are resultant of conceptual or exploratory studies. These studies have relied on developed social theories, yet many do not approach the concept through a deductive approach. Exceptions to this are several more recent studies which employ quantitative methods to measure attractiveness.

Rocca et al. (2012) determined that attractiveness is measured through the dimensions of development potential, intimacy, relational fit and profitability (along with relative sub-dimensions). The concept of “relational attractiveness of the customer” coined by Tóth et al. (2014) found that attractiveness is composed of the future profitability performance, customer intimacy, relationship intensity of the customer. In consideration of the definitions presented in Table 1, this study conceptualizes customer attractiveness as:

“Customer attractiveness is a comparative attitude that a supplier has towards the customer firm concerning the expected present and future social, relational and economic value rewards that are created through a relationship.”

Linking Customer Attractiveness to Information Sharing

Through an ever-expanding range of capabilities, retailers are collecting and processing consumer data, and transforming this into actionable knowledge. The application of this data through customer relationship (CRM) management systems can lead to increased firm performance (Reinartz et al., 2004). In the retail supply network, retailers allow their suppliers access to this information through mechanisms including Efficient Customer Response (ECR) (Corsten and Kumar, 2005), Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI) (Kulp et al., 2004), and sharing customer data collected through loyalty cards (Finne and Sivonen, 2008, Duffy et al., 2013, Humby et al., 2007). The case in this study focuses on the latter of these three mechanisms. Sharing loyalty card data has proven to be an important mechanism for developing retailer-supplier relationships in the industry. In their book covering this practice, authors Finne and Sivonen (2008) write:

“The sharing of sales data at shopper segment level will revolutionize retail–manufacturer collaboration. Information at shopper segment level enables suppliers to help retailers differentiate and increase customer loyalty in the target customer groups. Without this information, the recommendations given by manufacturers are based on average consumption, and their support for developing the shopper-driven retailing business model remains incomplete.” (pg. 312)

As a theoretical link to customer attractiveness, information sharing within the retail supply chain has received much attention in terms of what value it creates for the firms involved in the exchange. Information can be conceptualized as a resource in an exchange, resulting in the supplier providing better tailored products to more well-defined customer segments (Tseng, 2009). Effects from the implementation of the information will potentially alter the benefit-cost balance from the point of view of the supplying firm, and thus the CL_{alt} of other retail customers. This may also alter the supplier’s perception of the alternative retail customers, especially when determining the level of resources to commit to each buyer in the customer portfolio. If this value is altered, then the level of attraction towards the retail buyer is also likely to change. Moreover, the benefits from information sharing may extend beyond pure economic benefits,

giving retailers an added source of value in a partnership. Nollet et al. (2012) agree that even large, economically strong customer should still focus on their own attractiveness, suggesting the existence of other elements of customer attractiveness. Exploring the range of benefits arising from information exchanges between suppliers and retailers helps uncover what expectations of future value each party may hold, and thus the attractiveness of the informational exchange.

Value and Constraints of Information Sharing

The value of information sharing in buyer-supplier relationships has been widely addressed in the academic literature, yet there is still no consensus on what actual benefits are derived from the exchange (Hall and Saygin, 2012, Kembro and Näslund, 2014). From a performance perspective, Nyaga et al. (2010) proposed that information sharing is a factor that improves higher performance and satisfaction in the relationship. Furthermore they found that when information is exchanged between buyers and suppliers, buyers are concerned with the performance related results, while suppliers are concerned primarily with relational benefits. Information sharing may also result in cost and inventory level reductions for a manufacturer, especially when consumer demand is variable and lead times are relatively long (Lee et al., 2000). A more relational view of the benefits reveals that knowledge transfer is a means by which smaller buyers can make themselves an “interesting” customer to larger suppliers (Christiansen and Maltz, 2002). Sharing information with suppliers may also help in the development of new capabilities through learning (Giannakis, 2008). This is supported by Corsten and Kumar (2005), who found that smaller suppliers who partner with larger more powerful retailers in ECR projects will accept a lower proportion of the net benefits than the retailer. They contend that suppliers desire to learn from the “smart” retailer with the expectation of future benefits. Such findings suggest that information sharing is a prominent element in creating customer attractiveness. Specific to the context of this paper, value for suppliers may be further affected if information sharing occurs through more interactive *projects* rather than automatic *routines* (Baraldi, 2008). Benefits for manufacturers on loyalty programs include a higher return on investment for trade promotion spending that is less visible by competing firms (Zhang and Wedel, 2009).

Information sharing in the retail supply network also has many downsides and constraints. This is possibly due to a wide range of findings, due to a variety of research project contexts (Jonsson and Mattsson, 2013). Information sharing is impeded by the lack of ability or lack of motivation of the sending and receiving parties (Minbaeva, 2007). In many cases, the supplier does not have the competencies to engage with and capitalize on the data (Finne and Sivonen, 2008, Stone and Condrón, 2002). Relational factors also play a role in supplier engagement with retailers. Large retailers may coerce the supplier to share information for the benefit of the retailer (Kumar, 1996), causing concern for the supplier regarding future exchanges (Hingley, 2005). To encourage suppliers to engage with this data, one key is to treat them justly in terms of the resultant rewards and overall interaction (Duffy et al., 2013). From the point of view of the

retailer, the risk of opportunistic behavior from the supplier is often a factor that limits information sharing (Mohtadi, 2008). Dominant retailers are less prone to this effect (Cox et al., 2004), as well as retailers who have larger supply networks (Mohtadi and Kinsey, 2005). In terms of challenges with sharing customer loyalty card information, Finne and Sivonen (2008) noticed that a top challenge is integrating the data into everyday decisions and activities.

Overall, SET and attractiveness in particular have been established as a sound alternate means of conceptualizing and approaching the management of buyer-supplier relationships. This proof of concept has been further refined over the past decade, yet there is still opportunity to further explore attractiveness as a construct in B2B settings. Information sharing has received a much larger amount of attention, yet a true consensus has yet to be reached on its benefits (Kembro and Näslund, 2014). Furthermore, many factors pose challenges to the free flow of information between parties in real-world settings. A further understanding of customer attractiveness through sharing information will contribute to the debate of the benefits for retailers, while highlighting rewards that may facilitate this exchange in practice. Managing and sharing information is an activity that is difficult to execute for many retailers, yet it has a very large potential for benefiting the supplier. Furthermore, information sharing can be a source of a competitive advantage for both parties in the exchange. This would arguably increase its relative potential over simple economic turnover, which other competing retailers can more easily imitate. This paper applies the concept of attractiveness to a single case, exploring the effect of information sharing on customer attractiveness at the team and the organizational level. The following section will describe the research methods for this study.

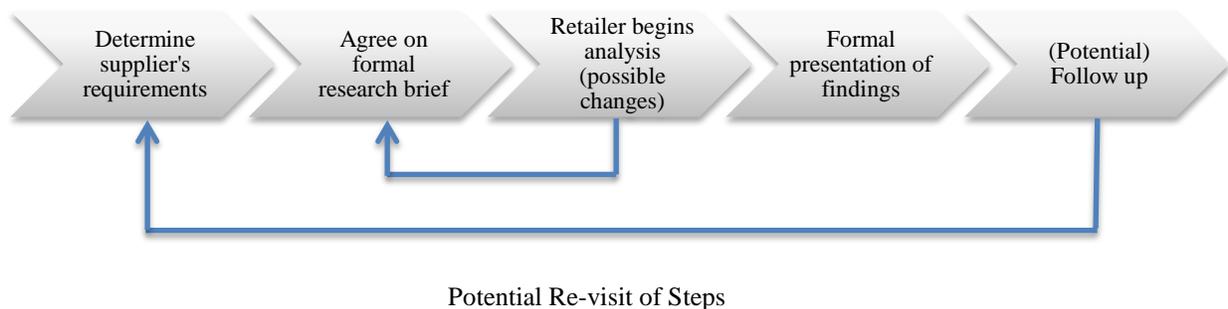
METHODOLOGY

This study collected qualitative data through a single case study, attempting to combine existing theory and creating new theory through an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). As defined by (Yin, 2003), this is a single embedded case study of a leading specialty UK-based retailer (hereby referred to as Pharma) and its suppliers. Case studies are useful for both the generation and the testing of theory (Eisenhardt, 1989, Flyvbjerg, 2006). According to the range of case study variations in Baxter and Jack (2008), this study is best described as an explanatory study. This type of study aims to explain possible causal links that are too complex for surveys or similar instruments. Furthermore, such studies are appropriate to link the implementation of information sharing projects to the effects (Yin, 2003). An explanatory case study was chosen as the best means to explore the phenomenon of information sharing alongside its context (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The primary unit of analysis is the information sharing project that takes place between the focal retailer and supplier, yet several projects will be analyzed. The boundaries of case studies are often difficult to define. This study is bounded by the retailer-supplier dyad, with a consideration of the wider network context.

The focal exchanges offer an appropriate context for analysis due to the complexity of the data and information being shared. Customer and market data are generally associated with higher-level business decisions, requiring more complex interactions (Wagner and Krause, 2009). This study will consider the exchange and relationship development of the dyad within the network context. Studies of dyads in a business network have indicated that a firm will try to improve its network identity by making it more attractive than alternatives by having perceived constructive effects through the establishment and development of a relationship (Anderson et al., 1994). Other research has highlighted that the consideration of this more complex environment leads to more holistic views of the relationship. With data collection from both sides of the relationship dyad, it is also possible to consider the impact of information sharing on customer attractiveness compared to other potential customers.

As the case retail company in this study, Pharma is a dominant player in certain categories of the UK market, comprising 60% of sales for the entire country. Therefore they can develop a clear picture of the overall market in these areas. It further strengthens their reputation of being an intelligent retailer. To support this intelligence, Pharma has one of the most widely used loyalty card in the UK, with almost 18 million active members (members using the card once in a 12 month period). They also have an online group of over 40,000 customers who participate in a variety of research topics. Pharma allows their suppliers access to the data collected through this card at a financial cost to the supplier. Suppliers can access basic POS data through a subscription to an online portal. Pharma also offers customized projects to suppliers which include much more complex tracking and mapping of particular customer segments. Depending on the supplier’s research objective, Pharma also conducts research through customer surveys and observation of customer shopping behavior. For the purposes of clarifying the nature of these information sharing projects (Baraldi, 2008), it is noteworthy to break them down into their main components. This is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Pharma Basic Project Process



Data were collected through 8 semi-structured interviews along with observational data and analysis of over 650 pages of company material. This material consisted of documents, spreadsheets, or slideshows relating to 1) Research project briefs; 2) Project outputs; 3) Data

analysis/methodology; 4) Meeting notes and; 5) Background information. Interviews were conducted from both sides of the retailer-supplier dyad. Six individual interviews were conducted along with two panel interviews. Interviews lasted between 30 -70 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2: Interview Participants

Interview	Participants
2 Panel Interviews (3 participants per interview)	Pharma Supplier Insights Analysts, Project Managers & managers in Partnership Marketing
2 Interviews – Pharma Analysts	Supplier Insight Analysts
2 Interviews - Suppliers	Account Managers (Supplying Firms)
2 Interviews – Pharma Managers	Pharma Channel Marketing Manager & Assistant Buyer

The analysis from semi-structured interviews followed guides from both Miles and Huberman (1994) and King and Horrocks (2010). Data analysis primarily focused on thematic analysis, as defined by King and Horrocks (2010). Descriptive memos were attached to data pertinent data evaluated by the researcher. Thematic analysis and descriptive codes thematic coding is desirable when either a small sample size is being used or when the researcher is not aiming to generalize to a wider population (Boyatzis, 1998). Memos were then grouped into categories that were given an interpretive meaning before being grouped into higher-level themes. Observational data were collected mainly through field notes, and were primarily used to gain a general understanding of the case firm. Key portions of company material were also analyzed through thematic analysis to provide an understanding of the dynamics surrounding Pharma’s information sharing projects. Care and measures were taken to ensure the case design and research process were valid according to the points highlighted in Maxwell (1996). Observation of the researcher and the analysis of company material provided the majority of the insight to understand the dynamics of the information exchange, while interview data provided employees’ perceptions of and interpretations of the buyer-supplier relationship.

FINDINGS

Pharma Project Characteristics

What is of particular interest in this process is the reversal of buyer-seller roles. In these cases, Pharma becomes the seller of the data and the service, while the supplier is the buyer. This has some interesting implications, which is also discussed in the following sections. The first steps of these customized projects involve the exploration of the supplier’s requirements. This is accomplished through initial interviews or through the exchange of a project proposal via email. In some cases, Pharma will clarify what they can potentially offer the supplier in terms of the retailer’s quality of data and capability to perform an analysis. Requirements are placed in a more formal document, along with the cost of the research to the supplier (the research brief).

This is often changed and negotiated through several steps. The primary goals of each project vary due to Parma's high level of customization and wide range of data. Project categories have been adopted from a similar study by Finne and Sivonen (2008) and applied to each collected brief. A total of 6 project briefs were reviewed. Customer profiling and shopping behaviors were the primary research goal for many projects. This is also true of category management goals, where the supplier is interested on how their products perform in the overall category, especially across different store formats. While each brief was analyzed individually, the objective was to get a general understanding of the goals and contents of these projects. The following section on presenting the costs and rewards of these projects is an analysis on the projects as a whole. Figure 2 outlines these areas:

Table 3: Research areas mentioned per individual brief

Research Area	Brief					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Customer Profiling	X	X	X		X	X
Category Management	X	X	X		X	X
Marketing (Promotional) Effectiveness	X	X	X		X	
Competitive Benchmarking	X		X			X
Concept Development	X			X		X
Targeted In-store Communications		X	X	X		
Pricing Decisions		X				
Demand Forecasting			X			
Marketing (Advertising) Effectiveness		X				

Rewards & Costs of Information Sharing Projects

Since customer attractiveness is a concept arising from SET and the analysis of costs and rewards, this was the approach taken to analyze the interview data. The overall findings of this section are that Pharma makes itself as an attractive customer by the *process* of the information sharing, combined with the actual *output* and recommendations from the end result. That is, both the outcome and process make the retailer an attractive customer, and the following cost-reward analysis follow these two categories. The cost-reward comparison has been mentioned in several attractiveness studies (Dwyer et al., 1987, Ellegaard, 2012), and studies on more general relational business-to-business areas (Anderson et al., 1994). Customer attractiveness in terms of both costs and rewards include current and expected future benefits (Hald et al., 2009, Rocca et al., 2012), therefore both realized and potential rewards and costs were considered in this analysis.

Process Rewards

Pharma is an attractive customer through *how* they share information, and not simply *what* information is shared. The attractiveness of these projects is primarily linked to a close working relationship that develops between the teams involved from both firms. The main process

rewards observed were: 1) project planning 2) flexible approach 3) effective project de-briefs and 4) retailer familiarity with the data.

Although many studies suggest information sharing should take place continuously and in real time (Finne and Sivonen, 2008), the loyalty card information in the case of Pharma takes place through ad-hoc projects employing a *flexible approach*. The projects require careful *project planning* due to budgetary concerns, and to ensure the right data is extracted and analyzed. Suppliers tend to appreciate when Pharma involves them in the planning process, and ensures that the supplier receives the maximum level of information for the investment. The abilities of suppliers are diverse and require a flexible and consultative approach from the retailer. This often requires that Pharma specify the potential of their own information, along with how it can be implemented in the supplier's marketing initiatives. Suppliers have a wide range of abilities in terms of recognizing the potential of the data, and converting the information into actionable recommendations. Pharma allows suppliers with higher data analysis capabilities to access and analyze data from an online self-serve platform. With ever-changing supplier requirements throughout each process, attracting suppliers' investments becomes a dynamic process (Ellegaard et al., 2003). One Pharma analyst summarizes this point well:

“Like I said you got two ends of the spectrum, you just have to modify your approach and how you work with them. I'd be lying if I said there is a “cut and dry” (approach), this is how all suppliers operate, because there isn't.”(Supplier Insight Analyst B)

Adding to the point of a flexible and dynamic approach to each project, suppliers enjoy having an extra point of contact with the retailer. This is especially apparent through *effective project de-briefs*. These presentations are open to any relevant retail commercial team members, who often learn much about their own product categories. The result is a retail buyer who is more educated and familiar with the supplier's product line. This is a clear positive note for the supplier. This added meeting may relate to the level of intimacy between the teams of both firms, leading to customer attractiveness (Rocca et al., 2012). This leads to the final process reward, which is the *familiarity of the retail team with the data*. This familiarity is comparative to scenarios where a third party stores and analyses customer loyalty card data, known as the “third party” model (Lee, 2000). The advantage to Pharma analyzing their own data is their familiarity with its context. One analyst described an instance where there was an anomaly in the data that their particular team could not explain. By speaking to Pharma's buying teams, there was a clear explanation as to why this anomaly existed. Such anomalies would be overlooked in the third party model and may give a skewed picture of the results.

Process Costs

According to interview and company data, suppliers will compare the process costs against the rewards of the informational exchange with Pharma. The perceived downside of the information sharing process also relates to the overall process of the project. The costs observed for the

supplier include 1) pressure from the retail buying team 2) lack of follow up 3) questionable research objectivity.

First of all, the process of sharing this information may be initiated through added *pressure from the retailer's commercial (buying) teams*. This may be related to the informational power of the retailer. According to Ramsay (1994), both the retailer and supplier have power. The extent to which this power is used can affect the trust and thus the attractiveness of one of the parties (Hald et al., 2009). Although in some cases it can be argued that the supplying firms are unaware of the potential of the information, which makes Pharma feel compelled to make these projects known. Supplier and retailer representatives indicated occasional pressure from the Pharma commercial teams towards suppliers, often as an apparent strategy to collect more financial resources from the supplying firm. This pressure generally adds a negative element to the attractiveness of the retailer.

In addition to this added pressure from the retail buying team, there are cases where the Pharma analyst team *does not follow up* after a particular project. Analysts agree that a routine follow up would allow both the retail and supplying firms to see how effective the implementation of some practices may have been. They believe that it would also increase the likelihood that these projects would be completed on a more continuous basis. One analyst noted that with a higher number of projects, analysts become more familiar with the suppliers products. This may lead to even more useful insights and recommendations. Yet it has not become routine for the Supplier insight team to perform any follow up. Systematic and in depth follow up meetings would give added level of relational benefits and retailer-supplier intimacy.

Finally, supplying firms noted that some of the data were presented in a manner that was suggestive of positive results. This would call the *objectivity* of the data under question, thus acting as a cost to the informational exchange. As one supplier noted, it can be as if some of the data were filtered to make the focal product lines appear to be achieving a higher performance. As one supplier mentioned:

“What we felt was they'd done, well two weeks and they'd done the (project) and they will then present it back to their commercial teams and then the data will come to us filtered. It may be a perception but it could be a lot more open.” (Supplier 2)

Of course, if the supplier feels as if the information in the project is not accurate, the process will yield much lower rewards, thus decreasing the attractiveness of the retail firm.

Outcome Rewards

Intuitively speaking, the main goal for the output of an informational exchange is for the supplier to be able to employ it as an input for other business activities. The rewards considering the outcomes of these projects vary from pure economical rewards, to more relational rewards that act as an input to building a stronger business relationship with Pharma. The outcome rewards

have been identified as 1) economic benefits through clear, actionable results 2) formation of additional business opportunities through superior relationships with the buying team.

The actual project outputs are beneficial to suppliers primarily in an *economic* sense, particularly when *actionable results* are included in the results. Outputs provide insight into creating more efficient marketing campaigns, or highlight areas of weakness in the performance of a certain product across different store formats. As one supplier highlights, the economic potential is the most prominent source of attraction for the projects:

“The most important reason and the reason to do this is it makes us more money and it gains us more money than it costs us to do the research. And that’s the simple way really to look at it.”(Supplier 5)

These benefits are more attainable if Pharma provides their own actionable suggestions for how economic benefits can be achieved. This is especially true for those suppliers that are not as familiar with engaging in this type of information. It is also worth noting that not all economic benefits can be measured, as generally observed in the academic literature (Kembro and Näslund, 2014). Yet through methods such as measuring coupon redemption rates, supplying firms estimate the potential economic benefits. Other softer or more indirect benefits as defined by Walter et al. (2001) are likely still based on the perceptions of the employees in each firm. These softer benefits include the added customer intelligence, insight into the performance of competitors, or the effectiveness of different package designs. Softer benefits are still included under the theme of economic benefits, as they must be perceived as a factor that will eventually result in financial gain (Baxter, 2012).

The second outcome reward is the *potential development of new business opportunities* with Pharma after these projects have been completed. This benefit can be subdivided into several sub categories. First of all, the projects provide an added point of contact and point of discussion with retail buying managers. When a retail buyer attends a meeting outlining the research findings, they become increasingly familiar with both the product of the focal supplier, and learn about their key customer groups, and performance for different store formats among other important metrics. This places the supplier closer to the forefront of the buyer’s mind, and also provides a basis for further discussions for other meetings between the buyer and the supplying firms account manager.

Once the retail buyer has become more familiar with the focal supplying firm product through the information sharing projects, they appear to me more likely to offer additional business opportunities. This may be viewed as an added access to resources, as outlined in Harris et al. (2003). An example of an added business opportunity was described by a Pharma manager outside of the supplier insights team:

“When you look at (brand 1, brand 2, brand 3) or there’s certain brands like (brand 1) that don’t do those actual insights. I won’t offer (brand 1) that banner ad there because I don’t have the insights because they’ve not done it themselves. Although I know with (focal supplier), that banner will work well for them because I know what customers are there.” (Retail Channel Manager)

This demonstrates that once Pharma managers are familiar with the product lines of suppliers who engage with the data, they are more willing to offer certain benefits such as added marketing exposure. This appears to be primarily through buyer familiarity, and confidence that certain advertising tactics will be effective. This supports views that buyers base a large portion of their decision making on specific product familiarity and previous experience (Kline and Wagner, 1994). It was also observed that if suppliers engage and invest in the loyalty card data, they are signalling their commitment to the relationship through transaction specific investments (Frazier et al., 2009). One supplier noted that these investments help open opportunities for Pharma to purchase other product lines from their firm, often ones which are more profitable for the supplying firm. Thus the results of investing in Pharma’s loyalty card information may expose the supplier to additional resources through familiarity and the “signal” that suppliers send regarding their commitment to the relationship.

Outcome Costs

Informational exchanges offer the potential for costs and downsides which counter the customer attractiveness of Pharma. The most prominent cost for supplying firms is the economic costs attached to the access to the data and the resources that Pharma must engage to provide tailored information to the supplier. The main outcome costs have been divided into 1) economic costs, 2) incomplete information and 3) lack of information uniqueness.

Supplying firms commented on the high quality of data, yet still noted that the information was *costly in an economic sense*. Although many suppliers understand that Pharma’s data is of high quality, most suppliers want this barrier to the exchange to be reduced. Suppliers also recognize that Pharma has contributed significant financial resources to obtain this information, but still see the investment as a considerable setback. This is mentioned by one of the major suppliers to Pharma: *“Because obviously (Pharma) know the quality, therefore they charge a lot more money. But that’s also then a big put off for suppliers to not invest.”* (Supplier 2) Other instances where this cost was prominent in the supplying firm’s decision to engage in the data lie in the various versions of the research briefs. Both the company material and interview comments indicated that research briefs undergo several iterations, mainly due to the costs that are involved. Suppliers often start with a long list of desired metrics and information in the first version of the briefs. Once Pharma attaches a monetary value to these metrics, often the supplier has to reword and eliminate items from the original brief. This demonstrates the effect that the price has on the desired outcome versus the realistic outcome from the supplier’s point of view.

The second major cost of participating in this exchange refers to the data that Pharma is willing to share with suppliers, which often yields *incomplete information* for the supplying firm. The attractiveness of the projects relies on high quality and precise data, and is arguably the primary reason for the supplier’s investment. As a general rule, Pharma does not provide information to their suppliers on their own private label brands. This is made known to the supplier at the outset of the project. For some categories, this is a substantial portion of sales. The result is incomplete information, which has a negative effect on customer attractiveness. For categories with a particularly high portion of sales contributed to Pharma’s private label, this has a large effect on the accuracy of the data. This also may have negative economic effects if decisions are made based on incomplete information. One supplier notes that this is a prominent downside:

“ ... (Pharma Private Label) is such a huge part of the cosmetics category and we can’t see anything about it at all. And so, that causes a bit of frustration because we have a huge hole in our knowledge, because what happens in (Pharma) is sort of ... it’s just a black hole of consumers and shoppers that we just don’t know (about). And that’s, that is probably the main frustration with it. That’s a structural thing within (Pharma) rather than the, the sort of the (loyalty card) team.” (Supplier A)

Finally, many of Pharma’s analysts are concerned with the degree of *uniqueness of the information* provided by their team is for the supplying firm. Many suppliers are very large companies with substantial resources and their own consumer research. According to Pharma’s analysts, there are cases where they have not given suppliers and additional information or recommendations beyond what suppliers already know. This is a considerable downside and cost for suppliers, as they invest in the information under the assumption that they will be provided with new information. If Pharma cannot provide information with clear actionable results according to new information, the supplier often feels that the investment should not have been made in the first place. This fundamental downside for the informational exchange also has a negative effect on Pharma’s attractiveness as a customer.

Table 4: Summary of Rewards & Costs of insights projects

	Rewards	Costs
Process – aspects related to the procedure of each project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective project planning Flexible and dynamic research approach Project de-briefs Retailer data familiarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressure from retail commercial team for the supplier to invest in the information. Lack of follow up from analysis teams to determine (in)effectiveness of each project. Questionable research objectivity.
Output – aspects related to the actual project output and value of explicit information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic benefits through actionable results Positive economic return on investment through clear, actionable results for the supplier Added business opportunities through additional product lines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incomplete information in output (no private label data). Lack of information uniqueness, as some larger suppliers may have obtained similar information. High economic cost of information.

Table 4 summarizes the above rewards and costs. These findings support the first research proposition:

P1: The degree to which information sharing affects customer attractiveness depends on the actual and perceived costs and rewards of both the *output* from and the *process* of the informational exchange.

Customer Attractiveness on an Organizational Level

The previous section discussed the costs of informational exchanges between the supplying firm and several teams within the retail firm. There must also be a consideration of how the input from these projects affects the customer attractiveness on a wider level. In Pharma's supply chain context, the findings from the sharing of information must be used and supported by management of both firms. This section will describe how Pharma takes the output from the information sharing projects to promote itself as an attractive customer with respect to other retailers. Findings reveal that information sharing is a major input in a Joint Business Plan (JBP) between Pharma and key suppliers. As a major contribution to the plan, information helps *align the goals* of both parties. Furthermore the *intelligence of Pharma as a retailer*, coupled with a *reciprocation of investments* in the relationship promotes customer attractiveness with respect to other retailers.

While the process and the outcome of the projects are important factors in determining its contribution to the JBPs, there are also factors that make the broader partnership with Pharma attractive. In cases requiring a closer working partnership, suppliers collaborate with Pharma on a higher managerial level. This collaboration is formally established through a JBP. The JBP spans a wide range of business areas between each firm, yet it generally involves higher levels of management from both firms. The JBP acts as a coordinating mechanism for the retail-supplier partnership, and as a way in which the relationship is held together. These plans require a considerable amount of resources, which includes the findings from the information sharing projects. This information is a primary input for the brand management and marketing areas of the JBP.

According to members of Pharma's Supplier Insights the quality of information sharing projects is an important factor for the success of the JBP, and thus the development of the overall relationship between Pharma and the participating supplier. Pharma analysts and their supplying firms noted that the added information and the JBP can align the goals of the partnering firms. For example, one supplier noted that the additional consumer information is crucial for growing their respective category as a whole, rather than simply churning customers within the category. A mutual agreement to grow the category through the JBP aligns expectations and future actions. *Goal alignment* promotes customer attractiveness, which supports observations from Hald (2012). The ability for two firms to be socially and psychically close also promote the attractiveness of healthy business partnerships (Wilkinson et al., 2005).

In addition to the potential for alignment through information sharing, the type of information available from Pharma was also a recurring theme. Pharma has a reputation for being an intelligent retailer, which contributes to the value and desirability of the loyalty card information. The level of intelligence of Pharma as perceived from suppliers stems from the presence and implementation of the information collected through the loyalty card. However, suppliers and analysts both commented that the type of information is particularly attractive due to the characteristics of Pharma's position in the market. Pharma is a specialty retailer compared to the larger UK-based food retailers. Other retailers collecting loyalty card data offer consumers a wide breadth of products, thus a wider target market. This breadth is reflected in the customer data offered. Alternatively, Pharma's data reflects a much narrower and deeper market. The perception is a more valuable information source, especially for those suppliers whose products are closely related to Pharma's key business areas. Moreover, the *intelligence of Pharma as a retailer* focused on developing valuable insight is a key component to the success and desire of the suppliers to enter into this relationship. Such aspects have been noted as antecedents to attractiveness (Hüttinger et al., 2012). Therefore it appears that the added intelligence of the retailer creates attractiveness for the supplier on a much broader level. One analyst summarizes this point:

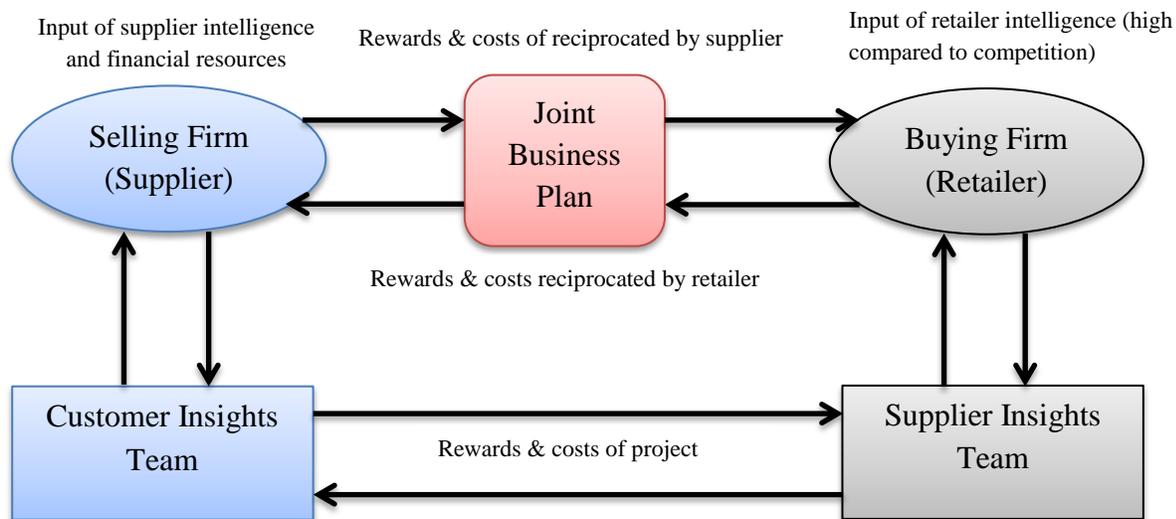
“The angle that (Pharma) has on it, that Tesco and Sainsbury's don't is that we are a health and beauty supplier so we've got a really in-depth view on people's mascara buying habits and whatever else habits that you can think of in terms of beauty, cosmetics, skincare. Shoppers are coming into (Pharma) for a reason, for their health and beauty needs. So it's different information, you're getting a different kind of customer journey in transactions.” (Healthcare Analyst)

Much of the data showed that supplying firm perceptions were similar. This criterion suggests that suppliers compare Pharma with other retailers on a broader level in terms of the quality of their information. The information can provide a clearer picture of loyal customers who frequently purchase from a specialty retailer. This information is not only useful in growing sales within product categories. Evidence from suppliers also suggest that information is used for product development within high levels of management, while serving as a foundation for research into the UK market. One particular supplier noted that the only consumer research for their firm was performed in the USA, thus no research existed for UK consumers. Information from Pharma acts as a major input for the supplying firm's internal marketing plans. Therefore, the quality and type of informational resource aids in a much wider network context. Anderson et al. (1994) termed these two particular positive effects in the network context as by resource-transferability and activity complementarity.

Many studies have highlighted the notion that attracting the right customers will gain the added benefit of getting preferential treatment from suppliers (Baxter, 2012). As noted earlier in this study, transaction specific investments also promote information sharing between supply chain

partners (Frazier et al., 2009). The JBP and the inputs involved in its formation represent the specific investments of both parties into a particular relationship. The case of Pharma shows that suppliers who are attracted to this relationship will invest in the collection and sharing of valuable customer data, with the intention of providing rewards unique to their own firm and to the partnership. The added resource input from suppliers will yield additional attention from retailer buyers and higher levels of management through the JBP. This reciprocation is also a result from the mutual desire to understand Pharma’s customer. By sharing loyalty card information, Pharma offers the potential for the supplier to gain economic rewards as discussed in the previous section. By investing in this data, suppliers signal their intention to understand Pharma’s customer in particular. This added communication and investment promotes the intimacy and the maintenance of the relationship, thus further increasing the level of attractiveness of the retailer. The desire to maintain the relationship stems from relational attractiveness (Tóth et al., 2014), which promotes further maintenance and relationship improvement. This cyclical pattern was noted by Ellegaard (2012) in analyzing attractiveness on a more interpersonal level.

Figure 2: Rewards and costs across organizational levels



Factors leading to attractiveness on an organizational level – The JBP process

- Supplier-retailer goal and activity alignment
- Retailer information quality due to market position
- Retailer reciprocation through relational specific investments due to relational customer attractiveness

Adopted from Ellegaard (2012)

If the sharing of information occurs this cycle will continue to occur, leading to a more positive relationship development and increased customer attractiveness. The consideration of information sharing on customer attractiveness on a wider organizational level supports the second proposition of this study:

P2: Information sharing through micro-level teams and processes provides input to wider-level collaboration between firms, thus affecting the customer attractiveness.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the current and preliminary assessment of the data, this study has considered how and why sharing customer and market based information can be a source of attractiveness for retailers. With the help from existing literature and data collected from a single case study, it appears that sharing market and customer based information has an effect on customer attractiveness. There is also a prominent theme surrounding both *how* this information is exchanged, and the respective *outputs*. Information shared through consultation and interaction from the retailer appears to have an effect on the attractiveness that differs from the transfer of raw data. The degree of attractiveness at a team level depends on the wide range of rewards and costs in the output and in the process. This study also found that outputs from a lower-level relationship affect attractiveness at a higher managerial level. The quality of information in this case results in a suppliers' perception of a smarter retailer, as well as a partner that can decrease the level of uncertainty.

This study also contains several managerial implications. First of all, this study supports the concept of customer attractiveness. This reinforces the view that firms must consider their own attractiveness to obtain strategic resources from key suppliers. Business managers may consider the findings of this report when designing the mechanisms and the process of sharing information across the supply chain. Promoting the level of customer attractiveness requires that the highlighted rewards are maximized and the costs are minimized. Furthermore, this study outlines the potential for information sharing on lower-levels of the organization to influence B2B relationships with key suppliers. Such findings emphasize the importance of managerial support and implementation of the recommendations based on customer loyalty information.

As with any study, there are several important limitations to consider. While it is the goal of a case study to understand a particular case, the mechanisms described in sharing information are not generalizable to other cases. Secondly, only one researcher was responsible for interpreting and analyzing the data. Arguably the story told from another point of view would yield slightly different results. Finally, this study is based on a large amount of secondary material, but only 8 interviews. These interviews also give only a perception of events, and participants may not have reported entirely objective facts. This is an issue that concerns any interpretive study involving semi-structured interviews. To improve this research, more in-depth multiple case studies could be conducted across several industries and with firms that have a varying degree of information sharing with their suppliers.

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