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Marketing–sales interface configurations in B2B firms

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ABSTRACT

As the body of knowledge on marketing-sales interface expands, there is a greater need to investigate the specific aspects of marketing–sales configurations in B2B firms. Using a qualitative methodology and interview data collected from over 100 sales and marketing professionals from the US, The Netherlands and Slovenia, this study presents a dynamic, evolutionary spectrum of four B2B marketing–sales interface configurations. These configurations are described in detail in terms of structure, communication patterns, information sharing, collaboration, and strategic outcomes. The findings show that no configuration is inherently superior. Our dynamic configuration spectrum offers managers a toolkit to evaluate their firm's marketing–sales interface in terms of current and desired positions, and contribute to their firm's market orientation and business performance.

1. Introduction

The widely embraced market orientation construct emphasizes the critical role of effective interfunctional interfaces within market-oriented organizations (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Slater & Narver, 1994). Smoothly functioning interfaces in such organizations offer many benefits: e.g. timely dissemination of market information, coordination of marketing activities in creating superior customer value, and market responsiveness. One of these interfaces is the marketing–sales interface. A firm's business performance greatly depends on how these two functions work together (Cespedes, 1992, 1993; Guenzi & Troilo, 2007; Smith, Gopalakrishna & Chatterjee, 2006) and how smooth, well-coordinated and conflict free this interface stays (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000). In contrast to marketing's interface with other departments such as R&D, which represent the vastly different commercial and technical functions in a firm, marketing and sales should be well equipped for effective cooperation. They both serve customers, with marketing entrusted with providing support to salespeople and building consistent brand image in the marketplace, and sales traditionally performing tactical tasks such as contacting customers, executing marketing strategies, and closing the sale in the field (Matthyssens & Johnston, 2006; Rouzies et al., 2005). In recent years, scholars have highlighted the need to reconsider the role the sales force may play in business organizations. LeMeunier-FitzHugh and Piercy (2006) suggest that a sales organization must be valued as a crucial source of critical market intelligence and propose that marketers must demonstrate to salespeople how their market feedback contributes to the firm's strategic activities. Piercy and Lane (2003) put forward that firms must leverage the market intelligence salespeople possess and start viewing the sales force activities as strategic customer management activities. Ingram, LaForge and Leigh (2002) argue that progressive sales organizations are becoming more strategic and are adopting a customer relationship management approach focusing on the initiation, development and enhancement of customer relationships. These recent observations suggest a more strategic role for sales, which further emphasizes the need for an effective and harmonious marketing–sales interface.

A review of the literature suggests that the marketing–sales interface has not been extensively researched, with some notable exceptions (Biemans & Makovec Brenčič, 2007; Homburg, Jensen & Krohmer, 2008; Kotler, Rackham & Krishnaswamy, 2006). Ideally, sales and marketing activities are closely coordinated, with salespeople collecting valuable customer-related information and passing it to their marketing colleagues (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000; Rouzies et al., 2005), and marketing using the information to create customized products and programs, and thus increasing value for customers. Unfortunately, over the years, several scholars have noted that the marketing–sales interface is not always harmonious and constructive (Beverland, Steel & Dapiran, 2006; Carpenter, 1992; Cespedes, 1993; Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000; Lorge, 1999; Rouzies et al., 2005; Strahle, Spiro & Acito, 1996). Specifically, Kotler et al. (2006, p. 78) conclude

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that "senior managers often describe the working relationship between Sales and Marketing as unsatisfactory. The two functions, they say, undercommunicate, underperform, and overcomplain." This interface assumes special importance within B2B firms, where marketing activities are frequently conducted by people in various departments (such as marketing, business development, technical support and development, and sales support) who may lack a formal marketing background and training. In such situations, effectively organizing and managing the marketing–sales interface may be especially challenging.

The preceding discussion suggests a need for greater inquiry into the marketing–sales interface. First, marketing and sales may not always exist as separate functions in an organization and their roles and responsibilities may depend on a firm's size, growth rate, products, industry and organizational structure (Biemans & Makovec Brenčič, 2007; Homburg et al., 2008; Kotler et al., 2006). This suggests that firms may exist on a continuum with firms on one end lacking a separate marketing function and firms at the other end of the continuum having sales and marketing as integrated functions with shared objectives. In addition, it is likely that depending on the intra-organizational and external variables, the marketing–sales configuration in a given firm may change over time and firms may move along the continuum. Existing studies have neither adequately addressed the relevant interface configurations for B2B firms nor paid attention to how they may change over time. Second, previous studies have looked at issues such as communication, collaboration and information sharing between the two separate marketing and sales functions (Cespedes, 1993; Ingram, 2004; LeMeunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2007). Since marketing may not always be a clearly defined function in B2B firms, we may see different patterns with respect to communication, collaboration and information sharing between the two functions. Further, these patterns may change as firms move along the continuum. Last, while researchers have investigated the strategic outcomes of an effective marketing–sales interface (Guenzi & Troilo, 2007), we do not know (a) whether (and how) different marketing–sales configurations may impact a firm's marketing proficiency and (b) the advantages and disadvantages of different configurations.

Our investigation of the marketing–sales interface in B2B firms addresses these gaps in the literature. The paper is organized as follows. First, we review the relevant literature about the marketing–sales interface. We then discuss our methodology and present a series of dynamic marketing–sales configurations and their related strategic outcomes. We conclude by discussing the theoretical contribution of this study, its managerial implications, limitations, as well as suggestions for future research in this area.

2. Literature review

Research on the marketing–sales interface has begun to expand in recent time. Scholars have focused their attention on elements of structure such as how these two functions are organized within the firm, their degree of formalization and decentralization (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000; Krohmer, Homburg and Workman, 2002), and processes such as interfunctional communication, information sharing, coordination of activities and collaboration between these two functions (Dawes & Massey, 2005; Matthyssens & Johnson, 2006; Oliva, 2006; Rouzies et al., 2005). In addition, scholars have also identified how structure and process dimensions of this interface, along with other interface characteristics, may affect a firm's strategic outcomes such as market performance or creation of customer value (Guenzi & Troilo, 2006; LeMeunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2007).

From a structure standpoint, scholars have noted that marketing and sales functions may exist as separate units (Homburg et al., 2008; Workman, Homburg & Gruner, 1998) or a single entity (Kotler et al., 2006) within a firm depending on factors such as firm size and nature of the industry. Interestingly, current research on the marketing–sales interface has always studied this phenomenon in firms where these two functions exist as separate and clearly-defined units. These studies have unequivocally indicated that this interface is frequently rocky, conflict-laden and adversarial (Beverland et al., 2006; Carpenter, 1992; Cespedes, 1992, 1993; Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000, 2002; Lorge, 1999; Strahle et al., 1996). A decade ago, a Marketing Science Institute workshop on interfunctional interfaces identified the conflict between marketing and sales as one of the critical areas that need to be addressed (Montgomery & Webster, 1997). A recent study by the Aberdeen Group (2002, p. 2) confirms the problematic nature of the marketing–sales interface by highlighting: "In many companies as much as 80% of marketing expenditures on lead generation and sales collateral are wasted — ignored as irrelevant and unhelpful by sales."

Researchers have attributed the frictions, animosity and mutual lack of respect between these two separate departments to various factors such as goal differences (Strahle et al., 1996), different perspectives toward the business environment (Beverland et al., 2006; Cespedes, 1993), cultural (Beverland et al., 2006) and thought world differences (Homburg & Jensen, 2007), lack of interfunctional integration (Rouzies et al., 2005), physical separation and poor communication (Lorge, 1999) and poor coordination during planning and goal setting (Colletti & Chonko, 1997). Problems may also arise because the sales organization feels that it owns the customer relationships and resists all efforts from other departments to contact their customers (Hulbert & Pitt, 1996). They may also question the value and costs of marketing. Donath (2004, p. 5) suggests that in B2B firms, these fundamental job differences also contribute to the divide between marketing and sales: "Marketing people talk to … business end-users, while salespeople typically spend their time with distributors and purchasing agents. Marketers deal with market segments and specific product groups. Sales, however, sees the world account by account." Many B2B firms also exacerbate the problem by creating separate marketing and sales functions, with the sales vice president often outranking the senior marketing manager.

Scholars studying the process elements of this interface have focused on (a) interfunctional communication, (b) information sharing, (c) information systems, and (d) collaboration between the two functions (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000; Rouzies et al., 2005); among others. Ruekert & Walker (1987) treat interfunctional communication, both face-to-face and impersonal communication, as an important element affecting interfunctional integration and thus a healthy, productive interface. The marketing strategy literature emphasizes that communication of market and customer-related information across the organization is a key factor in determining an organization's responsiveness to changing customer needs (Kirca, Jayachandran & Bearden, 2005). Homburg & Jensen (2007), while studying the thought world differences between sales and marketing, indicate that differences in product knowledge and interpersonal skills between the two functions may hinder interfunctional communication. This may create an interpretive barrier that precludes the exchange, absorption and interpretation of information across the functional boundaries and prevent them from reaching agreements on contentious issues. Relatedly, they find that the differences between these two functions in short vs. long-term orientations and customer vs. product advocacy trigger greater interaction and dialog between sales and marketing thereby leading to a positive market performance. Rouzies et al. (2005), using an integration perspective, suggest that firms may appoint certain individuals as integrators, who are able to facilitate communication between the two functions. They caution against indiscriminately increasing communication frequency and further note that strategic and frequently exchanged information is best routed through formal communication channels whereas information about unstructured problems is best communicated through informal communication channels. Maltz & Kohli (1996) suggest that it is necessary to achieve an optimal level of communication frequency and also note that an equal mix of formal and informal communication is optimal. They further mention that the effectiveness of formal/informal means of communication is influenced by the nature of information, the nature of the problem about which information is communicated, and environmental uncertainty.

Information sharing creates a collective understanding of the situation and helps to bring both sales and marketing on the same page. Information sharing has been shown to play a critical role in organizational learning (Slater & Narver, 1995), knowledge management (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000) and marketing orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). In addition, it has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on innovation and new product development (Moorman, 1995). Within the marketing–sales interface, Beverland et al. (2006) find that a greater degree of information sharing between the two functions allows marketers to link micro-level information from salespeople (e.g. information from a particular sales territory) with more macro approaches such as overall sales and marketing strategies, thereby changing their perceptions of the salespeople and facilitating strategy implementation. Such information sharing allows marketing and sales to obtain greater understanding of each others' role within the organization and thus reduces the cultural distance between the two and enhances their credibility in the other function's eyes.

Interfunctional collaboration refers to two or more departments working collectively toward achieving common goals (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Collaboration involves cooperation, representation, sharing of resources and the contribution of different organizational functions to strategic processes (Kahn, 1996; Li & Calantone, 1998; Ruekert & Walker, 1987). Interfunctional collaboration is a volitional activity with different functional units recognizing their interdependence and appreciating the need to join forces to achieve broader organizational goals (Kahn, 1996). Ingram (2004) suggests that firms may enhance collaboration between marketing and sales by implementing specific programs to increase communication and cooperation.

To summarize, scholars have begun to investigate the marketing–sales interface in greater detail recently. Theoretically, the extant literature on this interface has typically looked at organizations where sales and marketing exist as separate, well-defined functions and focused on how the interface's structure and process characteristics affect the firm's strategic outcomes. While Kotler et al. (2006) and Homburg et al. (2008) describe different marketing–sales configurations, the current body of research benefits from this study, which analyzes different interface configurations within B2B firms, associated process characteristics such as interfunctional communication, collaboration, and information sharing, and the resultant outcomes such as value delivery, firm responsiveness and marketing consistency for each of the configurations. It is also beneficial to assess how these configurations may change over time within an organization.

Staying within the extant theoretical paradigm of studying the structure–process–outcomes of this interface, we focus on the following specific research questions:

(a) Structure: how can the different marketing–sales configurations used by B2B firms be described in terms of functional separation, roles and responsibilities of marketing and sales?
(b) Processes: what are the characteristics of different marketing–sales configurations in terms of communication, information sharing and collaboration?
(c) Outcomes: how do different interface configurations and the resultant processes impact firm outcomes, such as value delivery and firm responsiveness? And what are the benefits and losses that B2B firms may experience as they move from one configuration to another?

3. Research method

We conducted a multi-national, multi-firm qualitative study of the marketing–sales interface in B2B firms in the United States of America, the Netherlands and Slovenia. This study is an extension of Biemans and Makovec Brenčič (2007) that only looked at a part of the Dutch and Slovenian samples. We acknowledge that each country sample has some unique, inherent characteristics that may influence the phenomenon under study. First, the three countries represent different economic conditions, which are expected to influence how the marketing–sales interface is configured and managed. Slovenia's economy has changed drastically in recent years after its split with Yugoslavia and entrance into the EU. These changes in the competitive landscape force Slovenian B2B firms to pay more attention to marketing and influence the marketing–sales interface. The Netherlands and the US are both developed economies, but while Dutch B2B firms largely depend on exports and have to deal with the complexity of subsidiaries, competitors and customers in many different countries, US B2B firms benefit from a large home market. Second, national cultures are different in the three countries from where our sample is drawn. We acknowledge that the national culture may influence how firms structure their organizations and how its constituents may deal with intra-organizational relationships. Hall (1976) posited that cultures may be evaluated on a continuum from low to high-context. In low-context cultures personal achievement and welfare are emphasized, while in high-context cultures group welfare and harmony are considered to be more important. Similarly, Hofstede (1980) proposed five dimensions to evaluate cultural differences. The first dimension, individualist/collectivist, is very similar to Hall's context continuum. Individualist cultures emphasize individual accomplishment and goals, while collectivist cultures focus on group norms and values. This suggests that firms in collectivist (high-context) cultures are expected to be more focused on developing and implementing a harmonious marketing–sales interface than firms in individualist (low-context) cultures. Within these paradigms, the USA would be classified as a low-context, individualist culture, while the Netherlands and Slovenia would be classified as relatively high-context, collectivist cultures.

Despite these differences, we believe that combining the three-country samples helped us increase the number of informants in the study, the variance in our data and the associated robustness of our data. To accumulate a wide range of experiences, perspectives and narratives, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 101 managers from various industries, such as electrical products, industrial equipment, chemicals, electrical components, raw

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Country	Number of firms	Industries	No. of respondents	Respondent functions
USA	41 (54.7%)	IT, raw materials, electronics, medical devices, electrical components, healthcare	56 (55.4%)	CMO, marketing manager, sales manager, sales rep, product manager, brand manager, key account executive
The Netherlands	17 (22.7%)	Ingredients, capital equipment, fabrics, IT, food products, packaging	24 (23.8)	CEO, marketing manager, sales manager, sales rep, product manager, sales support engineer, channel manager
Slovenia	17 (22.7%)	Telecommunication, chemicals, machinery, automotive, control systems	21 (20.8)	CEO, marketing manager, sales manager, CMO, R&D manager, project manager
Total	75		101	

Table 2
Distribution of three-country sample along four configurations.

Country		Hidden marketing	Sales-driven marketing	Living apart together	Integrated marketing	Total
USA	# of firms (%)*	2 (4.8%)	5 (12.1%)	20 (48.8%)	14 (34.1%)	41
	# of informants (%)	3 (5.3%)	8 (14.2%)	29 (51.8%)	16 (28.6%)	56
	Industries represented	IT, raw materials	Engineering products, electrical components	Electronics, IT, medical devices	IT, medical devices, industrial products, electronics	
The Netherlands	# of firms (%)	3 (17.6%)	5 (29.4%)	5 (29.4%)	4 (23.5%)	17
	# of informants (%)	3 (12.5%)	7 (29.2%)	5 (20.8%)	9 (37.5%)	24
	Industries represented	Ingredients, light capital equipment	Capital equipment, industrial fabrics	Capital equipment, IT, food products	IT, capital equipment, packaging, food ingredients	
Slovenia	# of firms (%)	4 (23.5%)	5 (29.4%)	5 (29.4%)	3 (17.6%)	17
	# of informants (%)	4 (19.0%)	6 (28.6%)	6 (28.6%)	5 (23.8%)	21
	Industries represented	Electronic devices, telecom equipment, software, control systems, data collection systems	Chemicals, telecom equipment, electronic devices, environmental solutions	Chemicals, machinery and electro industry, automotive, electrical installations	Steel construction, electro-optical industry, electronic and telecom devices	
Total	# of firms	9	15	30	21	75
	# of informants	10	21	40	30	101

*The percentages represent the relative number of firms/respondents in each of the three country samples.

materials, electronics, IT, medical devices and engineering products. The sample characteristics from all three countries are provided in Table 1.

We used theoretical purposive sampling, which refers to data gathering driven by concepts derived from evolving theory and based on the idea of "making comparisons," whose purpose is to investigate situations that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For the three countries, the samples were matched as closely as possible in terms of industry and firm size. Firm size varied from 35 to more than 1000 employees and annual sales ranged from $5 million to $200 million.

We used several sources to recruit interview informants: (1) word of mouth from academic colleagues, (2) existing contacts, (3) management seminars, (4) firms that fit our selection criteria (cold calling). Once we identified the key informant, we informed him/her about our study and requested participation, guaranteeing anonymity. Over 80% of our interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the remaining interviews conducted over phone. While face-to-face interviews are better suited to establish rapport with respondents and gauge their reactions than telephone interviews, research has revealed only minor differences between the two types of interview methods (de Leeuw, Mellenbergh & Hox, 1996): "The truth is that the answers acquired by both interview types do not differ much as far as quality is concerned" (Emans, 2004, p. 30). As informants, we selected the employees most closely involved with the marketing–sales interface, such as marketing managers, sales managers, product managers, sales representatives and CEOs. Most informants were employed by their firms for more than 5 years and were able to provide detailed information about both the current marketing–sales interface and how it had evolved over the years. Whenever we interviewed more than one informant in one firm, we checked the extent of agreement among informants.

The interviews were open-ended and discovery oriented (Deshpande, 1983), typically lasting between 1 to 1.5 h. Several interviews lasted two hours or more. During the interviews we discussed the current organization of the marketing–sales interface, division of tasks and responsibilities, coordination mechanisms used, interfunctional communication, information sharing, collaboration and firm outcomes. In each interview, we also talked about how the interface used to be structured in the past, whether there has been any change in the interface structure and other characteristics over time; if the interface changed, how it changed, and why the firm changed to its current marketing–sales configuration. To get additional information about these transition processes, we also observed real-time changes in the marketing–sales interface by conducting a series of longitudinal interviews in a limited number of firms. All in all, we conducted follow-up interviews with the same respondents in sixteen firms while in one firm the respondent was interviewed five times over a period of more than two years. All interviews in all three countries were conducted by local researchers, allowing respondents to be interviewed in their native language, maximizing the quality of information and minimizing the loss of information in translation. The researchers in The Netherlands and Slovenia are bilingual and hence, were able to translate the interview transcripts from the native languages to English. This facilitated the comparison and contrasting of the US data with the Dutch and the Slovenian data.

Consistent with McCracken's (1988) suggested interview procedure for face-to-face interviews, we first engaged in a few minutes of idle chatter at the beginning of our interviews in order for the informant to get comfortable with us. We kept our opening questions simple and informational, asking about the firm, its products and the informant's background and experience. Only after we were certain that the informant was feeling comfortable conversing with us we launched into the "grand tour" questions. While we stuck to our interview protocol (see Appendix A), we allowed respondents to guide the flow and content of discussion and tried to reduce interviewer-induced biases by maintaining objectivity (McCracken, 1988). When an informant shared his/her interpretations, we tried to clarify ambiguities and summarized what we heard them say. This offered informants an opportunity to elaborate on certain aspects, if needed.

Following qualitative inquiry practices, we coded our data iteratively and constantly refined our interpretations on the basis of subsequent interview data. When subsequent data did not raise any questions about our interpretations or add anything new to our understanding, we agreed that we had reached saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We verified the rigor of our data collection and data analysis as well as the trustworthiness of our interpretations following the procedures used by Corley and Gioia (2004). In addition, we used member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to determine the accuracy of our interpretation and findings in that we asked our informants to review our interview reports and interpretations and asked for their comments and feedback. This allowed us to

Table 3
Marketing–sales interface configurations and characteristics.

	Hidden marketing	Sales-driven marketing	Living apart together	Marketing-sales integration
Functional separation	• No separation between the two functions • All marketing and sales tasks performed by the same individual(s) • Marketing not seen as separate from sales and marketing not always part of job descriptions • Huge emphasis on sales activities	• Pesence of a marketing department • Marketing function either as spin-off of sales or a newly hired marketing manager • Marketing creates strategies and plans for broader directional purposes • Sales retains flexibility in plan implementation	• Marketing and sales are separate and distinct functions • Both functions have their own identity and job descriptions • Marketing formulates plans and sales implements them	• Marketing and sales are separate, yet closely related and complementary • Both departments work jointly on many of the plans and programs
Tasks of marketing	• Key tasks for both sales and marketing people are lead generation and follow-up; no real awareness of "marketing" • Both functions stay focused on short-term activities and results such as day to day operations	• Marketing as a sales support • Creates support materials, campaigns and collaterals • Conducts customer studies and generates new insights about customers	• Marketing combines information across sales territories and creates programs • Marketing acts as a conduit and connects sales personnel with one another • Implementing marketing strategies and programs once marketing hands them off	• Marketing and sales equally engaged in creating and executing strategies; there are no clear lines of responsibility demarcation • Emphasis on co-creating plans and programs, jointly testing them and gathering feedback
Tasks of sales	• Monthly / quarterly goals assume greater importance for both functions	• All traditional sales activities • Obtaining orders and being in touch with their customers	• Providing market feedback so that marketing understands the effects of their strategies and plans	• Sales appreciates the added value of marketing, marketing tries to create more value for sales
Interfunctional communication	• Communication is frequent and informal and occurs as information comes in and when needed, *ad hoc* communication • Communication is intuitive	• Marketing takes initiative and organizes periodic meetings • Communication evolves through experimentation • Mostly formal means of communication • Marketing tries to understand what is happening in the marketplace • Marketing wishes there is more informal communication	• More frequent communication during meetings with formal feedback • Informal communication is only used when necessary; function of interpersonal relationship between sales and marketing executives • Communication focuses on current strategies and activities	• Extensive use of both formal and informal means of communication • Very high frequency of communication, mostly bidirectional • Sales and marketing voluntarily contribute information
Information sharing	• No specific mechanisms to share information • Information shared mostly through informal channels • No formalized processes for sensemaking or information interpretation • No shared knowledge stores within organizations	• Sales does not acknowledge / appreciate that marketing needs information from them • Sales hesitates to share customer information • Information shared only when marketing insists	• Sales is encouraged to share feedback • Processes for information interpretation exist • Repeated failure on marketing's part demotivates salespeople from sharing information	• Constant and freely shared information hallmark of this stage • Information is not *owned* by any group, it is quickly disseminated across functions and acted upon • Successes and failures are shared quickly • Both functions are active in processes of sense-making, information interpretation, storage and usage
Collaboration	• Easy to achieve collaboration • Small firm size and informal communication help individuals to collaborate	• Marketing takes initiative; sales is passive about collaboration opportunities or possibilities • Marketing initiates customer visits to obtain better market information and improve its credibility in the eyes of sales	• Marketing initiates pilot programs and works with sales to test them • Marketing may invite sales group to participate in strategy creation • In some firms, collaboration is totally absent; both functions exist in silos and do not work together	• Most activities are joint activities • Both functions see value in obtaining assistance from the other group • Strong emphasis on collaboration
Dominant orientation and interfunctional relationships	• Sales orientation dominates • No apparent conflicts between sales and marketing • Marketing takes a backseat to sales	• Sales orientation still dominates, but traces of marketing/strategic perspectives evident • Marketing managers try to forge interpersonal relationships with salespeople	• When marketing disregards sales, sales questions the value of marketing • Sales tries to protect its turf • Clear cultural differences between the functions; if not managed well, they decrease the interface's productivity	• Marketing and sales cooperate well • Mutual respect and appreciation are evident • Conflicts are avoided or resolved constructively • Marketing and sales focus on both short and long term goals and objectives

check for mistakes, test interpretations and obtain additional information. Next, we discuss our findings.

4. Marketing–sales configurations

Our data show that not all B2B firms have separate formal marketing and sales departments. Depending on firm size, industry and the nature of products and customers, B2B firms organize their sales and marketing functions differently. As a result, marketing–sales configurations and their outcomes differ across firms. The following four basic marketing–sales configurations employed by B2B firms emerged from our data: (1) hidden marketing, (2) sales-driven marketing, (3) living apart together and (4) marketing–sales integration. A close look at Table 2 reveals that these four configurations have been identified in all three country samples. The Dutch and Slovenian firms are spread relatively evenly across the four configurations, while the US firms tend to be biased towards the last two configurations. The first configuration, hidden marketing, was found to be dominant in relatively small, young firms. However, there appears to be no relationship between the firm's industry and the nature of its marketing–sales configuration. Table 2 also highlights how our three-country sample was distributed across the four configurations that emerged from our data.

We highlight the uniqueness of each configuration by characterizing it according to their (a) structural characteristics, e.g. the formalization of marketing and sales in the organization and the tasks each function performs, and (b) process dimensions, i.e. interfunctional communication, information sharing and collaboration. These are summarized in Table 3 and discussed in greater detail below.

5. Configuration 1: hidden marketing

In some B2B firms, marketing did not exist as a separate function and thus could not be identified on the organization chart. In these firms, marketing was not absent, but merely hidden, with marketing activities typically performed by the CEO and/or sales manager. Sometimes, both strategic marketing issues (identifying target markets, creating communication and positioning strategies) and tactical sales issues (executing marketing strategies, communicating with customers) were handled by the same individual (Rouzies et al., 2005). Typically, these firms were relatively small and very sales-oriented; with "marketing" not being a part of an individual manager's job description. The dominant sales orientation forced managers to focus their attention on servicing current and prospective customers to achieve monthly or quarterly goals. There was no real awareness of or a purposeful effort toward developing marketing plans. In their current environments, these firms either did not appreciate how a separate marketing function and a more strategic perspective could contribute to improved performance or they were simply too small to allow for a dedicated marketing manager. As a sales manager in a small company remarked, "there is just not enough work for a full-time marketing manager."

In these firms, interfunctional communication was largely informal and *ad hoc*. We did not see any processes that could help these firms in activities such as sensemaking, i.e. making sense of the strategic information obtained from the marketplace (Weick, 1995). As a result, even though these firms were able to respond quickly to changing customer needs in the short-term, they never got around to (a) building knowledge stores and (b) using them to think about strategic issues and create long-term plans and programs (Barney, 1991; Day, 1994; Menon & Varadarajan, 1992).

Since these firms focused on day-to-day operations, they lacked formal mechanisms to collect and disseminate market information. Typically, firms would gather market information about individual customers, rather than market segments or the market in general, and *reactively* support sales opportunities (i.e., case-by-case).

In the absence of a separate marketing function, collaboration between people engaged in marketing and sales activities was relatively easy to achieve. All relevant individuals knew what was going on with the firm's key customers. Small firm size and informal communication facilitated collaboration on customer issues. However, this implies that in these firms the quality of the marketing–sales interface was strongly dependent on the background of the individuals involved and their interpersonal relationships. For instance, a sales manager explained his affinity for marketing by concluding: "I do sales in the daytime and marketing in the car and in bed at night." He also emphasized the chemistry between himself and the firm's CEO: "I had just been working here for a couple of months and we were already finishing each other's sentences!"

In terms of outcomes, firms with a hidden marketing function focused primarily on delivering high-quality products to customers and satisfying their short-term needs. A lack of departmentalization and an emphasis on informal communication allowed quick responsiveness to market issues. Value delivery was often realized by an individual salesperson, who decided how to meet a particular customer's needs. As a result, their market offerings exhibited greater degree of variance — e.g., the same products were positioned differently in different markets, different messages were communicated in different markets, or salespeople created their own region-specific promotional materials. In addition, in the absence of knowledge management processes, these firms paid insufficient attention to changes at macro-levels, such as emerging market segments, changing market structures, or market transitions from one product category to another. Instead of anticipating the future, these firms reacted to what they perceived to be happening in the marketplace today.

In summary, in firms with *hidden marketing*, marketing activities are performed by the CEO and/or sales director. The firm's proficiency at marketing is largely determined by the background and quality of one or a few individuals in the firm. When the sales director has affinity for marketing, the marketing–sales interface takes place inside his/her head and he/she must allocate his/her time between sales and marketing, with marketing typically taking the backseat. These firms are typically able to quickly respond to changing needs of individual customers, but do not think strategically and are always in a firefighting mode (Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2001). Nevertheless, respondents in firms with hidden marketing strongly feel that they are "doing marketing", even though they lack the resources to create long-term strategic plans and programs.

6. Configuration 2: sales-driven marketing

A second subset of our sample consisted of B2B firms with an embryonic marketing function and a very strong sales orientation. Many of these firms created a marketing function in response to changing market conditions and/or increased business activity. In these firms, the marketing function was typically a spin-off from the sales department, consisting of one or two individuals. These newly created marketing departments tried to initiate long-term strategic planning, but their focus remained on supporting day-to-day sales activities (e.g. by developing sales collateral). Sales would be in charge of customers and took care of obtaining orders, communicating with customers, and servicing them. In these sales-driven firms, marketing plans were created by marketers, but not always considered sacrosanct by sales. Salespeople would deviate from the marketing plan if they felt that the situation warranted it. In their mind, marketing plans provided broad strategic direction; yet they required flexibility in its implementation. Many salespeople remarked that having a marketing function was beneficial but not crucial for the firm's survival or growth. As one of them noted, "It is good to have a sense of where we are going. However, it is not something we have to abide by; lest we would falter in the marketplace."

Having established a formal marketing department, these sales-driven B2B firms also developed mechanisms to streamline interfunctional communication, mostly using periodic formal meetings. Marketing used these meetings to try to understand what was going on in the marketplace by asking salespeople feedback on the firm's "marketing" activities and how they could support sales. Many marketing managers also noted that they would like to have more informal contact with salespeople. However, since marketing was new for these firms, salespeople were not sure which information might be useful for marketing. In addition, they were often reluctant to provide marketing with customer information because they perceived it is as losing control over their customers. As a result, these firms relied on formal communication that did not always result in a free flow of information-marketers had to *ask* for information.

The firms with a sales-driven marketing function did not have much collaboration between marketing and sales. Marketing would do what it thought would be useful for sales and salespeople were not sure about marketing's added value. As one sales manager observed, "I don't have a background in marketing; I don't know anything about marketing and I gladly let my marketing colleague inform me about marketing." Indeed, sometimes marketing itself would only have a limited view of its added value. As one recently established marketing manager put it: "I am marketing, but if you would ask me to explain the difference between marketing and sales, I could not tell you. I do all kinds of things that the salespeople just don't get around to." Usually, marketing took the initiative for collaboration, e.g. by requesting joint customer visits to get better customer information. Because of marketing's strong focus on supporting sales, we did not find the conflicts and goal separation between these two functions that are so frequently mentioned in the literature (Lorge, 1999; Montgomery & Webster, 1997). Marketing managers in such firms used interpersonal relationships to increase their credibility in the eyes of salespeople and to establish informal channels of communication.

Having a marketing department introduced some strategic thinking in these firms and caused these sales-driven firms to consider "soft variables," such as brand awareness, brand equity and relationship marketing, in addition to the physical product. Nonetheless, they remained focused on responding to short-term customer needs, which directed marketing to short-term issues. In several cases, sales cooperated with marketing to deliver customized solutions to customers. When sales' short-term focus caused them to deviate from marketing plans, there were no systems to keep them on the path suggested by their marketing colleagues.

To sum up, while these B2B firms established an embryonic marketing function within a sales-driven culture, it allowed them to take the first steps toward more strategic thinking. However, in most cases, marketing was caught in the trappings of supporting day-to-day sales activities and sales perceived it as a convenient supplier of marketing collateral. Only a few of these firms showed the first signs of marketing carving out a niche for itself and sales starting to appreciate marketing's role.

7. Configuration 3: living apart together

A third cluster of firms possessed distinct marketing and sales functions, staffed by individuals with marketing and sales backgrounds. In these B2B firms, marketing and sales were both established functions, each with its own identity and well-defined job descriptions. Marketing would analyze market information and create marketing plans and programs, while sales would implement them. In addition, sales provided feedback to marketing, so that it understood how customers responded to the firm's strategies and activities. This is in sharp contrast to the firms with a sales-driven marketing function, where marketing's responsibilities and role were amorphous and emergent. In the words of a marketing manager, who commented on the changed role of marketing in her organization: "In the beginning, sales expected marketing to be active only at the end of the sales process. For instance, salespeople would ask us to produce brochures for specific customers. But this attitude has changed and sales now appreciates the added value of marketing." Marketing's primary function in these firms was still to support the sales group. However, marketing would combine analytical insights across different territories and formulate overall marketing strategies. In addition, marketing often acted as a *connector* by distributing information across different sales territories, e.g. by sharing success stories across territories through e-mail blasts or newsletters, or sharing best practices nationwide. Thus, the two functions were truly living apart together.

With established and mature marketing and sales functions, these B2B firms used both formal and informal channels of communication. Formal quarterly, monthly, or even weekly meetings between sales and marketing personnel provided opportunities to exchange information about current events in the marketplace. These formal meetings were supplemented by informal communication as a result of good interpersonal relationships/rapport between sales and marketing executives. During one of our interviews, a marketing manager and sales manager stated: "Our offices are just down the hall from each other, so whenever there is a problem we just drop in and discuss it." Another marketing manager in an IT firm noted, "It is very crucial to have a good personal rapport with your sales counterpart, because the ease of your relationship determines the ease with which you can communicate with that person." Marketing managers with good contacts within the sales group were more likely to receive information through informal means. Sales groups were typically encouraged to share market feedback with their marketing colleagues and clearly realized the value of their feedback. However we also found cases where salespeople did not know whether their feedback was (going to be) acted upon or not, and wondered whether marketing really cared about their insights and feedback.

With established marketing and sales functions came increased collaboration, especially during the early stages of strategy formulation (e.g. with marketing inviting salespeople to provide input to the process). But this collaboration was not universal. In several firms marketing and sales existed in separate silos, lacking open communication and exchange of information about problems or success stories. Furthermore, marketing would sometimes formulate plans and programs without taking into account market realities such as customer needs, competitive environment, or the feasibility of implementation. These firms would also have salespeople questioning the value of marketing and wondering about its raison d'être. One sales manager commented: "I don't think our company will lose anything, even if the entire marketing department were not to exist tomorrow." In short, here we found evidence of the mutual animosity, lack of respect and hostility that are mentioned in the extant literature (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000, 2002). As described in the literature, marketing and sales can have different goals, performance measures, cultures and ways of thinking (Carpenter, 1992; Beverland et al., 2006). We observed that these differences became very critical in firms with this configuration. Marketers would characterize their sales counterparts as "short-term focused, tactical and narrow-minded", and salespeople described their marketing colleagues as "inflexible, removed from market realities, and sitting in their ivory towers." A closer look at our data indicates that B2B firms with established marketing and sales functions are distributed across a spectrum ranging from 'problematic' to 'harmonious' interfaces. Apparently, having established marketing and sales functions makes these firms susceptible to all the dangers and problems mentioned in the literature about dysfunctional marketing–sales interfaces. When the inherent differences between the two functions are not managed appropriately, this serves as a perfect breeding ground for misunderstanding and conflict. We observed that only a limited number of firms managed to overcome these challenges and turn the marketing–sales interface into an effective and productive collaboration.

Clearly, having an established, more mature marketing function allows B2B firms to focus on more strategic issues, such as adding intangible value drivers to the value derived from physical products. Thus, it is in these firms that we find the first examples of mature marketing plans that address long-term marketing issues that go beyond supporting day-to-day sales activities.

8. Configuration 4: marketing–sales integration

A final group of B2B firms possessed not only a distinct marketing function, but also an integrated marketing–sales interface. In these companies, marketing and sales existed as separate, independent functions, but they were closely related and played complimentary roles. In sharp contrast to the firms with established marketing and sales functions from the previous configuration, in B2B firms with marketing–sales integration, both functions were jointly responsible for creating marketing plans and programs. Moreover, even though marketing and sales were also responsible for several specific non-overlapping tasks, they would frequently work together on them voluntarily. It would often be difficult to identify where marketing's responsibility ended and the responsibility of sales began. These firms emphasized the *co-creation* of marketing campaigns, with marketing departments inviting salespeople into the strategic process and using their insights because they believed it would strengthen their marketing plans. Marketing also stayed very close to sales in the implementation of marketing strategies. Both departments appreciated the added value of the other function and used every opportunity to involve them.

The marketing–sales integration was realized through an optimal mix of formal and informal means of communication, with people in both departments stimulated and feeling motivated to exchange information. Because marketing and sales had an equal stake in the creation and success of strategies and plans, they both wanted to contribute the best ideas and develop the best possible plans. This directly affected interfunctional communication in these firms: people grabbed every opportunity to pass information along to the other group, fully expecting them to use it. If the other function would be unable to use the information provided, this was clearly communicated to the information's source. This practice reduced misunderstanding and stimulated open communication. These firms also used formal processes to get together, make sense of market feedback, interpret information and collectively store it and ensure that it will be accessible when needed, which contributed to their learning capability (Sinkula, Baker & Noordewier, 1997; Zahra & George, 2002).

Naturally, the free flow of information, combined with mutual respect, facilitated collaboration in almost all marketing and sales activities, such as identifying new market opportunities, creating new product offerings and responding to changes in the marketplace. In fact, both marketing and sales viewed collaboration as essential to their day-to-day work. Apparently, these companies had managed to effectively address many of the collaboration challenges that have been identified in the literature, and that plagued many firms having established marketing and sales functions (configuration 3).

We must emphasize here that the existence of an effective collaborative relationship does not imply that there was no conflict between marketing and sales. Indeed, several respondents talked about specific conflicts. However, they pointed out that these conflicts were always resolved through open discussions. As one marketing manager noted, “Sales and marketing, by their very nature, are designed for conflict. What is important is to keep the broader goals in mind and work through your differences constructively.” In these firms, marketing understood the short-term perspective of sales and sales was mindful of marketing's strategic plans and objectives. In some firms, the collaborative atmosphere was stimulated by the fact that both functions reported to the same individual.

All in all, the B2B firms with marketing–sales integration seem to correspond most closely to the description of firms enjoying a constructive, harmonious marketing–sales interface. There is mutual respect, information is freely shared and both functions are involved in each other's activities to increase the firm's overall performance in the marketplace.

9. Interface configurations: an evolutionary perspective

When viewed holistically, it became apparent that the four B2B marketing–sales configurations that emerged from our data can be interpreted to be positioned on a continuum with “Hidden Marketing” as a starting point and each subsequent configuration representing an evolution from the previous configuration. Many respondents described in great detail how their firm's marketing–sales interface went through changes that closely correspond with the transition from one configuration to the next. In addition, our longitudinal data support our interpretation of the four configurations as evolutionary stages. For instance, in one firm the arrival of a new CEO introduced a series of related changes aimed at improving the firm's level of market orientation, including the establishment of a new marketing department that

Table 4
Marketing–sales interface configurations and outcomes.

	Stage 1: Hidden marketing	Stage 2: Sales-driven marketing	Stage 3: Living apart together	Stage 4: Marketing-sales integration
Value delivery	• Focus on physical product • Actual delivery largely determined by the sales representative • Salespeople offer personalized customer service	• Focus on physical product plus a few intangibles (e.g. awareness, brand equity) • Due to sales orientation marketing is forced to think tactically, which affects value delivery	• Marketing creates intangible value and supports tangible value provided by sales • Value for customers decreases when sales and marketing are not on the same page	• Both functions participate in all aspects of designing, developing and offering value to customers • Ability to deliver superior value to customers that encompasses both tangible and intangible elements
Responsiveness	• Very responsive to changing short-term needs of individual customers • Always in a *reactive* mode • Lacks the ability to identify and respond to macro-level changes	• Sales tries to identify and enhance customized solutions • Sales wants to retain autonomy; some actions are not consistent with marketing's suggested plans	• Emerging responsiveness to long-term needs; firms are proactive in identifying emerging market/customer needs	• Highly responsive to both short and long-term needs, because of joint activities and shared perspective • Proactive identification of opportunities and threats because of easy flow of information
Marketing consistency	• Value delivery is up to each salesperson • Inconsistencies likely across sales reps • Marketing messages differ across territories	• Short-term sales messages are increasingly consistent, long-term branding and communications are inconsistent or absent • Marketing provides framework for communication to sales; reduces variability	• Emerging consistency in long-term marketing messages • Short-term pressure may cause sales to sometimes deviate from the designed strategy • More overall adherence to marketing strategies	• Concerted efforts to maximize consistency over time, across customers and across industries • Significant adherence to strategies since both functions are involved in strategy creation and execution
Benefits of current stage (gains)	• Effective and efficient communication • Strong focus on individual customers • Interface not marred by animosity, lack of respect or inefficiencies as noted in the extant literature	• Marketing offers systematic sales support • Emerging attention to long-term marketing issues • Marketing creates its own niche and increases sales' awareness concerning their added value	• Increased long-term strategic perspective • Increased customer orientation • Ability to balance both short-term and long-term goals	• Increased value creation for customers • Significant attention paid to latent and emerging needs in the marketplace • Firms able to make course corrections when needed
Disadvantages of current stage (losses)	• Absence of long-term strategic thinking and planning • Strategies are knee-jerk reactions to changing market conditions • No understanding of marketing's potential; thus, not optimal use of latent capabilities	• Marketing may be perceived as an emerging threat • Emerging turf battles and breakdown in communication • Lack of understanding of marketing's added value	• Potential differences between marketing and sales • More room for misunderstanding and miscommunication • Potential for classic problems of animosity, lack of respect, mutual disregard, as noted in the literature	• Danger of groupthink • Lack of dissent may be counterproductive

drastically changed the relationship between marketing and sales. In another firm, that increasingly dealt with large international customers, the desire for a more consistent brand image and firm performance resulted in a total restructuring of the firm's commercial department. As part of this overhaul, regional sales managers were transformed into market segment managers and the position of strategic marketing manager was created to improve the link between marketing and sales. In other cases, movement along the spectrum is the result of increasing firm size. Small firms start out with just a sales department and only create a formal marketing function when their scale of operations requires it. As this marketing function grows in size and develops its own identity and strategic orientation, the firm faces the challenges that accompany these new configurations. Our longitudinal observations and data collection thus support our contention that the four marketing–sales configurations can be interpreted as a dynamic evolutionary spectrum. This interpretation of our data was also confirmed when we contacted some of our informants after a year or so and discovered that their firms had moved to 'the next' configuration.

10. Interface effects

Our interpretation of the configurations as stages of evolution should not be taken to imply that all B2B firms must advance along the spectrum or that marketing–sales integration is the ultimate and ideal configuration for the marketing–sales interface for each B2B firm. Instead, all four marketing–sales configurations represent different organizational structures that are appropriate for different types of B2B firms. For instance, small B2B firms simply lack the resources for a separate marketing function and it makes no sense for them to establish one and thus move on to the next stage. Indeed, all configurations offer both specific benefits to be gained from the marketing–sales interface, as well as specific disadvantages and challenges to be dealt with. Table 4 summarizes the outcomes, as well as the gains and losses, of each subsequent configuration.

In B2B firms with a hidden marketing function, the marketing–sales interface typically referred to the relationship between the firm's CEO and sales manager and strongly depended on the quality of this personal relationship. Short communication lines and frequent informal communication contributed to an effective interface. These firms were able to respond quickly to the changing needs of individual customers. While this configuration was appropriate for most small B2B firms, we must note that they lacked a more strategic orientation and therefore had only limited awareness of broader market developments and how they might benefit from them.

B2B firms with sales-driven marketing benefited from having a marketing department through improved communication programs with increasingly consistent short-term communication. In addition, marketing performed strategic activities that sales might not have the time, inclination or capability to perform, such as creating a customer database, identifying purchasing patterns, identifying key purchase influencers and developing support materials. However, there was also emerging attention to long-term strategic issues. Marketing started to carve out a niche and sales began to appreciate marketing's role and added value. A potential problem at this stage is that salespeople start to perceive marketing as an emerging “threat” and are unwilling to share information with them. They interpret the establishment of a marketing department as an indication of sales' declining importance within the organization. Some firms even showed the first signs of impending turf battles that have been widely noted in the extant sales-marketing interface literature.

B2B firms with established marketing and sales functions benefited from a mature marketing department by developing both short-term and long-term plans for responding to changing market conditions. In addition, these firms started to be more proactive in their dealings with the market. They also achieved more consistency in their marketing messages. Having separate departments, each with its own distinct identity and responsibilities, provided firms with both a short-term tactical and a longer-term strategic capability. It helped them to increase their customer orientation and proactively identify what customers might need tomorrow. Interestingly, this stage proved to be a double-edged sword. Separate, distinct departments also proved to be a fertile breeding ground for misunderstandings, conflicts, and turf battles. Indeed, it is here that most of the marketing–sales conflicts seemed to arise, since both functions were more aware of their tasks and goals, and what they needed to contribute to the firm.

At first glance, marketing–sales integration appears to be the ideal marketing–sales configuration, with both functions harmoniously collaborating to offer superior value to customers. Because these firms had mechanisms in place that allowed them to learn and store knowledge, they were also able to deal proactively with long-term changes in the industry and to maintain consistency in value creation and delivery. Furthermore, they were even equipped to identify and address emerging needs in the marketplace. The integrated marketing–sales configuration allowed these firms to address changing market realities and change course when needed. We must note, however, that this configuration also has its potential downside. One danger of such a close and collaborative relationship is the potential for groupthink, where different people become too much alike, lose their unique voice and perspective, and the group lacks constructive dissent (Janis, 1972). Some managers mentioned a lack of dissenting voices as a potential weakness of such a configuration. It is interesting that marketing literature discusses the negative effects of constant dissent between marketing and sales, while several of our respondents emphasized that this is all part of the game and dissenting voices can be very constructive. They mentioned, however, that you need the right organizational structure and climate to turn the dissenting voices into a constructive discussion and positive outcome. The management literature has shown that transformational leadership plays a significant role in this regard (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1990). Transformational leaders encourage people to “think out of the box” and understand the issues from multiple perspectives and thus, may steer the marketing–sales departments toward a constructive dialog.

11. The role of national culture

We acknowledged earlier that each of the three countries represented in our sample had some unique characteristics of their own. Nonetheless, our findings indicate that all four configurations (and the related evolutionary perspective) were identified in all three country samples. There were some differences in the distribution of firms across the spectrum between the three countries (with the distribution of the Slovenian firms skewed towards the former stages and the US firms' distribution skewed towards the latter stages). However, we observed that the configuration characteristics were independent of country context. This does not mean that national culture does not play a role in the marketing–sales interface. Our findings suggest that while all four marketing–sales configurations were found in all three countries, significant differences existed in how firms managed the configurations. For instance, the US sample included many respondents that used aggressive language and metaphors in describing their firm's marketing–sales interface. One US salesperson commented on her marketing department as follows: “What kind of marketing department is that? When I kept telling them that it [communication strategy] was not working, they kept teaching me how to talk to the customer…it was so ridiculous…I was like, don't you understand? This is *NOT* working [emphasis added].” Another informant from the US noted, “We do not know what these people do in marketing…seriously…they get paid, so they must bring some value to the firm. Unfortunately, we, in sales, are seldom able to see that value [laughs].” In contrast, the Dutch respondents were much more tolerant and accepting of the situation. A typical remark from a Dutch respondent was: “Of course we have discussions and conflicts between marketing and sales. But that's all part of the game." These differences seem to reflect the underlying differences in national cultures, with Americans being more focused on individual and personal effectiveness, while the Dutch are well-known for their tendency to always look for compromises. Thus, our findings suggest that while national cultures appear to have only a marginal influence on how the marketing–sales interface is configured, they may significantly affect how managers deal with the interfunctional relationship.

12. Concluding discussion

12.1. Theoretical contributions

The results of our study of B2B marketing–sales configurations make several important contributions to the existing literature. Most importantly, this is the first study that explicitly investigates the marketing–sales interface in the context of B2B firms of various sizes and from various industries. Most of the extant literature either focuses on the marketing–sales interface in B2C firms or does not distinguish between B2C and B2B. Our findings demonstrate that the specific characteristics of marketing in B2B firms strongly influence the marketing–sales interface and its outcomes. Nevertheless, some of the marketing–sales configurations identified in our study correspond to those found in other more general studies of the marketing–sales interface. For instance, our "sales-driven marketing" is similar to the "sales rules" configuration from the study by Homburg et al. (2008) and our "marketing–sales integration" is comparable to the "integrated" stage identified by Kotler et al. (2006).

In addition, the current literature emphasizes that a firm's performance greatly depends on how well its marketing and sales functions work together (Cespedes, 1992, 1993; Guenzi and Troilo, 2007; Smith et al., 2006). However, our findings demonstrate that the quality and outcomes of the marketing–sales interface strongly depend on the characteristics of both functions and how the interface is organized. Contrary to most of the literature, we do not present one marketing–sales configuration as the ultimate solution, together with suggestions to achieve this ideal state. Instead, we posit that firms must develop the marketing–sales configuration that best matches the characteristics of the firm and its environment. To this end, we present a dynamic spectrum of four different marketing–sales configurations that may be useful for B2B firms, with each configuration representing a different organizational arrangement, different operating/process characteristics and different outcomes. This offers a nuanced perspective on the underlying dimensions and the variety of the marketing–sales interface that can be found in B2B firms (Homburg et al., 2008).

Apart from presenting our four marketing–sales configurations, we also propose that they can be interpreted as a dynamic, evolutionary spectrum that describes how a B2B marketing–sales interface may evolve over time as the firm grows in scope and complexity. This evolutionary perspective on the marketing–sales interface is closely related to a B2B firms' development of a marketing capability, with firms initially appointing just one or two persons in a marketing function to support sales, which subsequently evolves into a full-fledged marketing department with a distinct identity. Thus, our description places the evolution of the marketing–sales interface at the heart of a B2B firm's efforts to increase its market orientation (Day, 1994; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990).

Our study is also the first to provide rich characterizations of several marketing–sales configurations that are prevalent in B2B firms, using variables such as interfunctional communication, information sharing, collaboration, division of tasks and responsibilities, strategic outcomes, and advantages and disadvantages. While the extant literature tends to advocate an interface that is smooth, well-coordinated and free of conflict (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000), we show that no single configuration is inherently superior. Each configuration has its own benefits and disadvantages and fits a specific type of firm and economic conditions.

Finally, our study offers a first glimpse of the factors that cause firms to move along the spectrum (e.g. increasing firm size, increasing scope of operations or a changing customer base). In addition, our description of the four configurations illustrates the cumulative effects of building a marketing capability. One respondent concluded enthusiastically: "We are currently at Stage 2, but we want to move to Stage 4. And we would like to skip Stage 3." But a firm that wants to achieve marketing–sales integration must first invest in the development of a more mature marketing function, which is perceived as a credible partner by sales. If sales does not view marketing as a capable and credible partner, marketing–sales integration may be too ambitious.

12.2. Managerial implications

The findings from our study have useful implications for managers. First, managers can use our description of the marketing–sales interface configurations and the spectrum to analyze their firm's position. Based on such analysis, they may identify elements of their current marketing–sales configuration that need to be strengthened, modified or developed. During "member checks," several of our informants stated that our descriptions suggest specific implementable measures to improve their communication and collaboration between marketing and sales by redesigning existing processes and organizational platforms. In some cases, managers may even use our findings to "scale back" specific elements of the interface in their search for a more effective marketing–sales configuration. Our identification of the various configurations and their underlying characteristics also help managers to take proactive steps in planning the next stage should they foresee organizational expansion.

Our findings also suggest that each configuration has both benefits and drawbacks. This is an important insight, which may help managers to appreciate and assess the costs and benefits of moving their organizations across the spectrum and to design effective configurations. Managers may assess how different configurations affect interfunctional communication, collaboration and relationships and make decisions accordingly.

Finally, managers may use our spectrum of four stages to determine their firm's desired position for the near future and identify the critical elements of an effective change program to move the firm along the spectrum. Our parsimonious model of the evolving marketing–sales interface in B2B firms would be of great help in communicating the desired changes internally. In analyzing a firm's current and desired position, our detailed description helps managers to take a holistic view of the marketing–sales interface, as well as its contribution to the firm's overall market orientation. Naturally, managers are not limited to our four marketing–sales configurations; they may also use our descriptions to design their own unique configuration of interface characteristics that best matches their firm's specific characteristics and circumstances.

All in all, our dynamic spectrum of B2B marketing–sales configurations offers managers a tool to evaluate their firm's marketing–sales interface, both in terms of current and desired positions. This helps them to further develop and leverage their marketing–sales interface and thus to contribute to their firm's market orientation and business performance.

12.3. Limitations and future research directions

Our study has some limitations. First, to obtain rich descriptions, we collected our data through in-depth interviews. Deeper and additional insights would be gained by observing organizations *in-situ* for an extended period and collecting real-time data. Second, this study may be treated as exploratory, but to enhance the generalizability of our findings, we selected informants from various organizational positions in diverse firms and industries in three different countries. Furthermore, several industry presentations of our findings to groups of managers and their agreement with our interpretations support the validity of our evolutionary spectrum of B2B marketing–sales configurations. Furthermore, our findings are consistent with the recent results of Homburg et al. (2008). Third, our reliance in most cases on single key informants may be considered as a limitation. One may argue that depending on their functional affiliations, our respondents could be predisposed toward their function, thereby giving rise to biased responses. We addressed this limitation by using multiple informants where possible and discussing our findings during several industry presentations to get feedback. We also let our informants review our collective findings and interpretations, which gave them an opportunity to reflect upon their opinions in the context of collective findings of the study. Last, since national culture affects how people may interact with one another and how they relate to each other, it is possible that our findings may have been confounded by cultural underpinnings that we did not focus on specifically in this study. Hence, while the cross-national nature of our data is the strength of our study since it enhances the variance in our data, one may argue that this could be a potential weakness.

Our findings suggest many avenues for future research. Scholars may investigate what drives a firm to move along the configuration spectrum we identified. It will be interesting to study how such change programs are designed and which organizational factors are critical in ensuring success of such programs. To measure the impact of changes in the marketing–sales interface, one could employ a longitudinal research method measuring both the marketing–sales interface and several indicators of firm performance (profit, sales, market share) at different points in time. An alternative approach would be to use a large-scale survey to gather data from a large number of firms about their marketing–sales interface. This would allow researchers to investigate the existence of the 'best' configuration for different types of firms, as characterized by variables such as firm size, product complexity and market maturity.

Given that services differ from products on many characteristics, one may also compare the marketing–sales interface of product manufacturers with that of service providers in a B2B context and explore whether they exhibit different patterns. Future research may also investigate whether employees' formal marketing background and training or lack thereof facilitates or impedes whether and how firms move along the spectrum we identified. We used a three-country sample in this study to investigate marketing–sales interface configurations. Scholars may specifically focus on cross-cultural aspects and investigate this interface for the similarities and differences between executives and marketing–sales interfaces within each country. These suggestions for future research should help us to advance our knowledge of how to design effective marketing–sales interfaces in B2B firms.

Appendix A. Interview protocol

How are the marketing and sales functions in your firm organized?

How do you divide tasks between marketing and sales?

How are the various market-related responsibilities assigned to marketing and sales departments?

When it comes to working with the sales (marketing) function on certain activities, how do you go about it? Do you follow a particular process?

How would you characterize your interaction with the other function? What do you think you do well? Are there are areas of improvement?

Does your working relationship with sales (marketing) affect how you respond to market/customer needs? How?

Have the marketing and sales functions in your organization undergone any changes in the past few years (e.g. expansion, creation of new groups, etc.)? What prompted the change? Do you think the change has helped your firm?

Do you expect the relationship between the marketing and sales functions in your organization to change in the near future? If so, what are these changes and what would cause them?

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