
Guest editorial: Interactions, relationships and networks in a digital era

The “digital era” is upon us. The past couple of decades, most notably the past 5–10 years, has seen the appearance and intense development of digital phenomena at large, such as the internet, including, for example, the Internet of Things, social media, digital communication and big data.

Often limited in the literature and in practice to the communications and information dimensions of business, the reality of digital developments can in fact demonstrate a far greater span of influence. Indeed, it can directly or indirectly cover aspects of business in the industrial marketing and purchasing field. Industrial marketing and purchasing approaches have evolved essentially around ideas relating to the specifics of industrial buying, the importance of buyer–seller relationships and more recently the importance of taking into consideration the network concept and buyer–seller relationships in their relationship context. Areas of research considering these perspectives vary from purchasing, with derivatives such as sustainable purchasing, international purchasing, etc., through to themes such as industrial marketing, project marketing, solution selling, as well as manufacturing, new product development, logistics, sales, key account management and market research, to name but a few. Importantly, all these approaches lend themselves to consideration of the impact of digital technologies and practices. The articles published here bear witness to this diversity and spread.

The first article “Eight organizational enablers for digital service-sales ambidexterity in industrial firms” adopting a case study approach considers the services dimension of business, whilst also going off on a rather different tack examining the area of digital service-sales and associated organizational enablement mechanisms. Digital technologies are seen as the bases for derived digital services and potential for future growth, and the authors point out and deplore the backseat role often allocated to the sales function when discussing digitalization. Digital servitization is thus considered to be a critical factor, and the authors propose the notion of DSSA (Digital Service-Sales Ambidexterity) where ambidexterity represents “managing trade-offs between exploiting their established business and exploring digital opportunities”. The authors then go on to propose, from a managerial implementation

perspective, eight DSSA organisational enablement mechanisms at various levels in the firm – macro-, micro-, and meso- –on the basis of case analysis.

The second article “The emergence of Omni-channel marketing in the Digital Era: A Systematic Literature Review” places the focus on a specific issue, that of omni-channel marketing approaches and the “digitally astute customer”. An exhaustive review of the omni-channel literature acts as a basis to identify shifts in channel dynamics within the digital era. The findings result in a proposed framework providing a reconceptualization of the notion of omni-channel. The authors propose that the framework then be used to consider digital trends and to generate strategies for data capture and data-driven omni-channel marketing strategies. Whilst the focus here is on omni-channels and their management the findings are also of interest and potential utility for channel literature in general faced when with the digital forces at play. The authors stress, in their view, the research potential, in particular, relating to the areas of multi-faceted data identification, capture and utilisation.

The third article “The Interplay between Product Innovation and servitization: The mediating Role of Digitalization”, takes up the theme of servitization – seen as a recent trend in business with a view to extra value creation via product and service provision as opposed to product provision alone – its links with product innovation, and the mediating role played by digitalization. A survey of 500 manufacturing companies from one European country, ranging in size and activity, led to the conclusion that product innovation had in practice no direct effect on servitization. However, an indirect effect was observed. This indirect effect was enabled via the digitalisation capabilities of the firm, acting as mediator.

These three articles taken overall provide a glimpse of the breadth and depth potential for research around the digital theme, and of course for related managerial implications. Focus here in two of the three articles can be seen to be on the notion of services and servitization, but with nonetheless different angles of attack. Given the enormous intrusion of the digital into all aspects of business life we suggest that these articles can serve as inspiration for exploiting what we consider to be the massive potential for digital considerations in research at large in the industrial marketing and purchasing field. Such research could consider, for example, digital technologies and practices and their impact on supplier–buyer relationship development, on network building and management/development and buyer behaviour, to name but a few.

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