

Don't be shelf-fish! – What is problematic about putting business customer solutions on the shelf?

Introduction and Research Aim

Attempting to improve their competitiveness and profitability, suppliers in business-to-business (B2B) markets increasingly offer complex solutions combining products and services often relying on outcome-based value propositions (Baines and Lightfoot, 2013; Fang et al. 2008). This is reflected in concepts like hybrid offerings (e.g., Ulaga and Reinartz 2011), servitization (e.g. Raddats et al. 2019), and customer solutions (e.g., Tuli et al. 2007). However, customers buying and implementing such solutions, often feel overwhelmed by their purposeful use. Hence, in a number of cases, customer solutions are obviously bought or ordered, but only used gradually or not at all (Jacob, 2015; Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012). We define such “unused solutions” as *customer solutions that have been implemented in whole or in part that are not or only partially used by the customer firm so that the value proposition of the solutions originally agreed between customer and supplier are not or not fully realized.*

From a marketing perspective, unused solutions are critical as they typically require high customer as well as provider investments of money, time and other resources, which ‘fizzle out’ somehow after their full or partial implementation. Consequently, they may result in financial losses, negative effects on the respective business relationships, and may cause further reputational damages. However, in spite of the sometimes enormous investments that are at stake and the possibly very negative effects on customers and suppliers as well as their relationships with each other, unused solutions have not been investigated from a marketing perspective. This applies to the conceptualization of the phenomenon itself, the reasons that might lead to the emergence of unused solutions, and the forms they can take. A better understanding of unused solutions therefore offers the opportunity to shed some light on the ‘dark side’ of customer solutions that are otherwise usually seen as a very promising

development in the context of B2B marketing (e.g., Eggert et al., 2011; Johansson et al., 2003). Furthermore, such an improved understanding of unused solutions can also help to avoid or at least reduce their previously outlined disadvantages for suppliers as well as for customers.

Beyond this background, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1: How can unused solutions be conceptualized from a marketing perspective?

RQ 2: What effects do unused solutions have on suppliers and customers?

RQ 3: What are the drivers of the emergence of unused solutions?

RQ 4: What types of unused solutions can be differentiated?

RQ 5: How can unused solution be avoided or reactivated?

Research method

Based on a conceptualization of unused solutions, we conducted an explorative qualitative study following a theories-in-use approach (Zeithaml et al., 2020). To this end, we interviewed twenty-five firm representatives experienced in the field holding management positions in different solution provider (16) and customer firms (7) from information technology and manufacturing.

Findings

Based on our conceptualization of unused solutions and the results of our empirical study, we developed a model of customer solution (non-)usage (Figure 1): Unused solutions are the result of mismatches, first, between a customer solution value proposition (CSV proposition) and a customer solution value expectation (CSV expectation) (Mismatch 1), and second, between CSV expectation and customer solution realization (Mismatch 2). These mismatches are driven by lacking supplier solution capabilities and/or lacking customer solution capabilities. This may result in four types of unused solutions (Table 1). Interestingly, only the first two types of unused solutions are assessed negatively by the customers, while the two further ones are

assessed positively by the respective customers as both offer flexibility and opportunities for future business developments. Particularly, mismatch 1 may lead to unused solutions of the type “missing product-market fit”, whereas mismatch 2 may result in the types of “lost and found’ customers”, “service option” and “exaptation”.

Moreover, our results provide initial insights through which measures unused solutions can either be avoided or reactivated.

Tab. 1: Types of unused solutions

No product-market fit	‘Lost and found’ customers	Service option	Exaptation
The solution is not implemented yet.	Customers use solution partially	Solution is only needed for certain applications.	Customers use solution differently than originally planned.
There are great difficulties in the cooperation.	Irregular exchange between customer and provider	Customers purposely enter into backup solution.	New variation benefits both customers and suppliers.
Perceived negatively by customers		Perceived positively by customers	

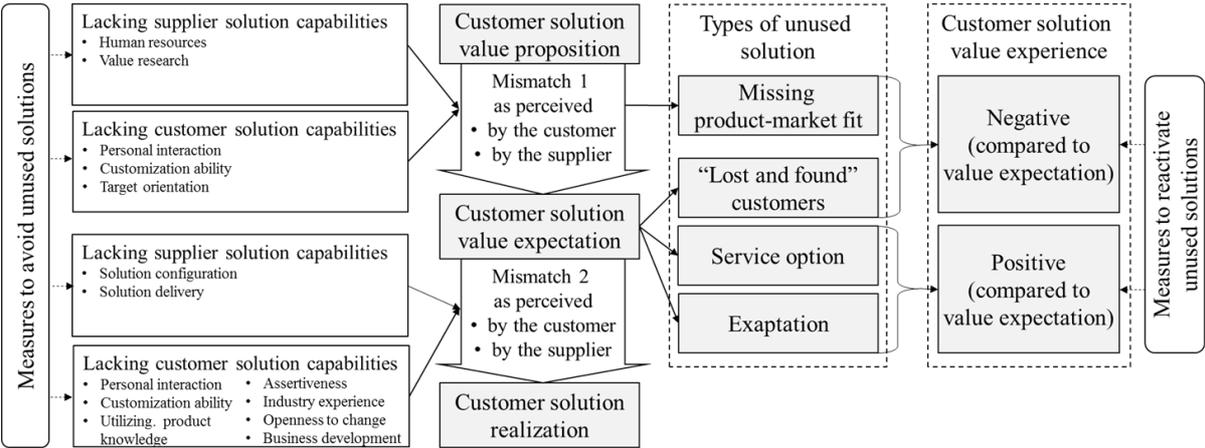


Fig. 1: Model of customer solution (non-)usage

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