

Exploring the Role of Strategic Marketing Department

Valentina Kirova
La Rochelle Business School

This research uncover the contribution of marketing function to corporate strategy in the specific context of a company having a strategic marketing department through a single case study. The most significant contribution is the theoretical and empirical assessment of a relationship between strategic marketing and marketing architecture at corporate level, suggesting that configuration theory approaches are valuable in the strategic marketing field. The case study shows that the creation of a strategic marketing department at corporate level is a way to support strategic change and competitiveness particularly in organizations moving from product-centered to extensive customer-centered orientation.

INTRODUCTION

Questioning of the contribution of marketing to the general strategy goes back to the early 1980s (Biggadike, 1981). Since then, substantial theoretical and conceptual work based on the marketing - strategy interface has been produced, demonstrating the significant interest raised by the issue (Wind and Robertson, 1983; Day, 1992; Lynch, 1994; Piercy, 1995; Piercy *et al.*, 1997; Slater and Olson, 2001; Varadarajan, 2010). From a theoretical point of view, marketing engendered a large number of conceptual and technical contributions, such as segmentation, positioning and targeting. However, researchers focus on mainly operational orientation that leaves little scope for strategic challenges, in spite of the medium and long term thinking that requires the strategic planning (Vega and Rojas, 2011). From a managerial point of view, the contribution of marketing within the organization is generally established on the basis of the hierarchical grid defined in strategic management. The role of marketing varies according to organizational level: corporate, business unit, or functional (Piercy *et al.*, 1997).

The ambition of some scholars to schematize more precisely the contribution of marketing to strategy reveals a new consideration, that of the architecture of marketing activities within the company. Workman, Homburg and Grüner (1998) reveal the importance of this issue. They examine structure, centralization and power of the marketing function and draw a parallel between the organization of marketing activities and coordination with other functional entities. The architecture of marketing activities (in terms of structure, cross-functional coordination and power) is likely to have a direct influence on marketing performance and by extension on company performance (Moorman and Rust, 1999; Feng, Morgan and Rego, 2015).

The combination of these findings led to the genesis of an integrative framework. The vision of a double level relationship between both functions – through marketing strategy and strategic marketing – come forward in the late 1990s. Conceptually, researchers differentiate marketing strategy, as part of marketing management and strategic marketing as the contribution of marketing to the general strategy (Varadarajan, 2010).

The main assets of strategic marketing are the deep knowledge of consumer needs and the ability to appreciate competitive behavior. It enables the combination of the internal resources of the firm with the

opportunities of the environment in the search for an optimal long-term competitive position (Sharma, 1999). As a corollary, the concept of marketing strategy is usually associated with, on the one hand the segmentation, positioning and targeting, and on the other, the optimal allocation of resources at product/market level.

From the organizational point of view, in order to improve synergies between marketing and strategy a few major companies began choosing to create a strategic marketing departments at corporate level. Even though the scope of the strategic marketing department is dependent on the firm's context and competitive position, all of these new structures are designed to create the connection between marketing and strategy at the highest level of the organization. This observation reflects the obvious fact of the importance for some companies to define an organizational perimeter within which to make the link between marketing and strategy. Does the creation of a strategic marketing department allow synergies to develop between the marketing function and the overall strategy and under what conditions?

In order to explore this question, we will examine the example of an organizational integration of marketing in corporate strategy through a single case study of a French services company. The research design is based on a longitudinal participant observation and in-depth interviews with key informants within a company. Conceptually, the case study is grounded on the marketing and strategy interface theory.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE LINK BETWEEN MARKETING AND STRATEGY

The academic literature suggests different types of connections between marketing and strategy. However, a general vision seems to come forward. Discussed previously, this vision of a two level match between marketing and strategy, through the marketing strategy on the one side, and more generally through strategic marketing, is shared by a large number of researchers (Thomas and Gardner, 1985; Greenley, 1993; Varadarajan, 2010). Marketing strategy is largely seen as a way to pursue the objectives of acquisition and retention of customers through the three pillars - segmentation, targeting and positioning. Strategic marketing, as a contribution to the overall firm strategy, is logically linked with the choice of market development strategy and the acquisition of strategic competitive advantages on targeted markets.

Strategic Marketing: Historic Evolution of the Concept and Organizational Perimeter

The concept of strategic marketing is present in academic literature since the 1970s. However, its definition as a field of research and managerial practice appears more recently. In the early 1990s emerges a commonly accepted vision of strategic marketing, understood theoretically as the contribution of marketing to strategic management, and from a managerial point of view, as the first contact between marketing and strategy at the highest hierarchical level in the company (Varadarajan, 2010).

In the first academic contributions relative to the marketing - strategy interface, there has been a tendency to use indiscriminately the terms of strategic marketing and marketing strategy. Wind and Robertson (1983) argue that strategic marketing should overcome the current limitations of marketing management, which dominates the discipline. It must therefore include issues centered on the long-term generation of competitive and consumer advantages. The logical consequence is the need that the company organization reflects this separation between the long-term strategic activities and the operational marketing activities. Shiner (1988) conceives strategic marketing as a firm's overall marketing position. It is a way to integrate the marketing planning function with the firm's strategic plans.

In a further set of studies, strategic marketing is related either with the strategy at the corporate level or with market-orientation (Wiersema, 1983; Blois and Mathur, 2000). According to Wiersema (1983), strategic marketing has a twofold responsibility. On the one hand, the marketing function directs corporate strategies based on a deep market and consumer knowledge. On the other hand, strategic marketing is expected to support the development and implementation of corporate objectives and strategy. Corporate planning often overlooks operational goals and its approach to strategy is top down. In

consequence, strategic marketing offers a possible connection between "top down" and "bottom up" strategies, because of its upward orientation.

Blois and Mathur (2000) broaden this definition of strategic marketing with an orientation towards competitors. According to them, strategic marketing is the combination of corporate strategy and competitive strategy. Strategic marketing is an integral part of market-orientation. The ultimate goal of market-orientation is to bring together consumer satisfaction and the company's business performance. Strategic marketing is supposed to deliver information in order to analyze markets and coordinate the organizational units.

The more consensual vision of strategic marketing shaped progressively from the end-1990s. The main advantages of strategic marketing are the deep knowledge of consumer needs and the ability to understand competitive behavior. Strategic marketing can thus combine the internal resources of the firm with the opportunities of the environment in search of an optimal long-term competitive position (Sharma, 1999). Though strategic marketing and marketing strategy differentiation can be based on the concept of competitive advantage. In this sense, marketing strategy serves to produce a business-related competitive advantage and a high level of profitability by optimal product – market positioning. As a result, to be competitive at this level any organization must select and implement a marketing strategy that is compatible with its corporate strategy (White and Griffith, 1997). By extension, strategic marketing aligns internal resources (financial, managerial and organizational distinctive skills) with market specificities (clients, competitors, and partners) to generate a strategic competitive advantage for the company at corporate level. Strategic marketing can achieve a superior competitive performance by means of four core activities: marketing research, strategic situation analysis, customer value orientation and marketing information systems (Brooksbank and Taylor, 2007).

More recently, in an extended conceptual work, Varadarajan (2010) delineates the domain of strategic marketing as a field of study and defines marketing strategy as an organizational strategy construct. With regard to a large body of theoretical and empirical work Varadarajan (2010, p.119) states that the domain of strategic marketing is encompassing “...the study of organizational, inter-organizational and environmental phenomena concerned with : (1) the behavior of organizations in the marketplace in their interactions with consumers, customers, competitors and other external constituencies, in the context of creation, communication and delivery of products that offer value to customers in exchanges with organizations, and (2) the general management responsibilities associated with the boundary spanning role of the marketing function in organizations.” In parallel marketing strategy is “...an organization’s integrated pattern of decisions that specify its crucial choices concerning products, markets, marketing activities and marketing resources in the creation, communication and/or delivery of products that offer value to customers in exchanges with the organization and thereby enables the organization to achieve specific objectives.”

Organizational Approaches of the Marketing – Strategy Relationship

In previous academic work, researchers and business practitioners are increasingly interested in topics related to the organization of the marketing function and recognize the importance of organizational structure in marketing (Workman, Homburg and Grüner, 1998; Lee, Kozlenkova and Palmatier, 2015). Even if these studies provide important insights, they are predominantly conceptual (Homburg, Workman and Jensen, 2000).

Ruekert, Walker and Roering (1985) develop a contingency approach that gives insight to marketing managers in organizing marketing activities. When developing appropriate organizational structures to exercise marketing activities managers have to choose between an internal organization (employees) versus external organization (independent contractors). In parallel, the authors mobilize three dimensions of organizational structure - centralization, formalization and specialization. They dress a model suggesting four archetypal marketing structures in a matrix with internal versus external organization combined with various structural characteristics. Each one of these four structural types (bureaucratic, transactional, organic and relational) is supposed to fit with a particular market and organizational conditions in order to generate performance.

Piercy and Cravens (1995) consider that the question of marketing organization covers more than the mainly administrative issues of internal departmental structure. Marketing organization is a fundamental strategic issue concerned with intra-organizational relationships and inter-organizational alliances. These organizational dimensions are highly significant both at a corporate marketing level and for the implementation of marketing strategy. Piercy and Cravens (1995) attempt to achieve two useful contributions. First, they try to make explicit different types of organizational issues in marketing, according to the strategic level with which they are associated – the enterprise/corporate level is matched with the business/functional level. Second, they dress a number of implications for managers confronted with developing marketing structures in the future.

In the late 90's we can see the development of a more empirically grounded approach to the design of marketing activities. Workman, Homburg and Grüner (1998) present a conceptual study followed by field research in 27 US and 20 German firms. The study focus is on the design of marketing activities and the identification of factors that might influence the organization of these activities. Their extensive investigation enables the identification of dimensions that allow for the comparison of marketing organizations across business units. In addition, researchers classify the aspects of a business unit's environment that might account for variations in marketing organization.

According to Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2000) there is growing evidence that the way firms organize their marketing activities is subject to major changes. They provide an integrative perspective through which to view specific organizational changes in marketing. The exploration of major transformations in marketing and sales organization is based on qualitative interviews with 50 managers. The main contribution of this empirical work is the identification of a global transition from product-focused organization to customer-focused organizational structures.

Another range of studies is linking marketing organization and firm performance (Feng, Morgan and Rego, 2015). Vorhies and Morgan (2003) demonstrate that firm performance within the trucking industry is influenced in part by how well the marketing organization structure variables are aligned with business strategy. Olson, Slater and Hult (2005) provide additional support for this finding and suggest that it is generalizable across a broader spectrum of industries. Recently Feng, Morgan and Rego (2015) prove that marketing department power has important firm-level effects and can predict firms' future financial performance.

To summarize, a review of the relevant research on strategic marketing and the organization of marketing activities illustrates that there are many marketing – strategy issues that have not been sufficiently investigated. In particular, we notice that (1) marketing's contribution to strategy at corporate level remains slightly explored; (2) the architecture and the particularity of marketing department at corporate level have not been examined in previous investigations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology is consistent with the exploratory nature of the research question. Our objective is to uncover the roots of successful integration of marketing in general strategy in the particular context of a company having created a strategic marketing department. In this context, Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013) recommend the use of qualitative research, claiming that it is the best strategy for the discovery and exploration of a new field.

A case study methodology was selected as it allows the development of a detailed and profound study of the subject. As much as the main subject of research is multifaceted, highly dependent on cultural context and type of organization, a single case is of interest, because of its particularity and its ability to answer the question raised (Yin, 2014).

The longitudinal research procedure is based on two complementary phases of data collection. The first one year period, is a participant observation in the strategic marketing department of a French financial services company Laser. This method turns the researcher into an observer – and in the meantime a full actor in the everyday life of the company. The objective is to provide a new understanding of the subject studied, or where appropriate, to confirm results emerging from the

literature. Participant observation involves a strong familiarity with the field and an empathic understanding of the people observed.

Based on observations extrapolated and compared with theory, in a second phase, a series of twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders both within and contributing to the creation of a strategic marketing department.

The types of data collected are very rich and diversified, the qualitative research approach enabled the collection of detailed in-depth historical process data. To respect the longitudinal character of the investigations, a chronological recording was made in a research journal. Following the recommendations of Eisenhardt (1989), different types of data were collected: semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, observation, internal documents (reports, e-mails) and external documents (sales brochures, press material). Given the access to various data sources, the validity of the research was enhanced by triangulation.

Data processing was conducted in two stages. Transverse analysis of the textual data corpus helped to consolidate and enrich the information emerging from the literature themes. A content analysis was used to identify and code all verbatim covering a common theme. To increase reliability and make the process more transparent, a second stage was carried out which consisted in conducting a content analysis using QSR NVivo 10 software. The integration of qualitative data software processing is in line with the multifaceted nature of the data processed and assures time savings and relevance of the results.

As suggested by Langley (1999), different strategies can be adopted to approach process data. In this article we adopt a hybrid restitution process combining narrative, visual mapping, temporal bracketing and synthetic strategy. To improve the understanding of the case, a brief review of the company's history is presented before illustrating the major themes emerging from field research.

MAJOR RESULTS

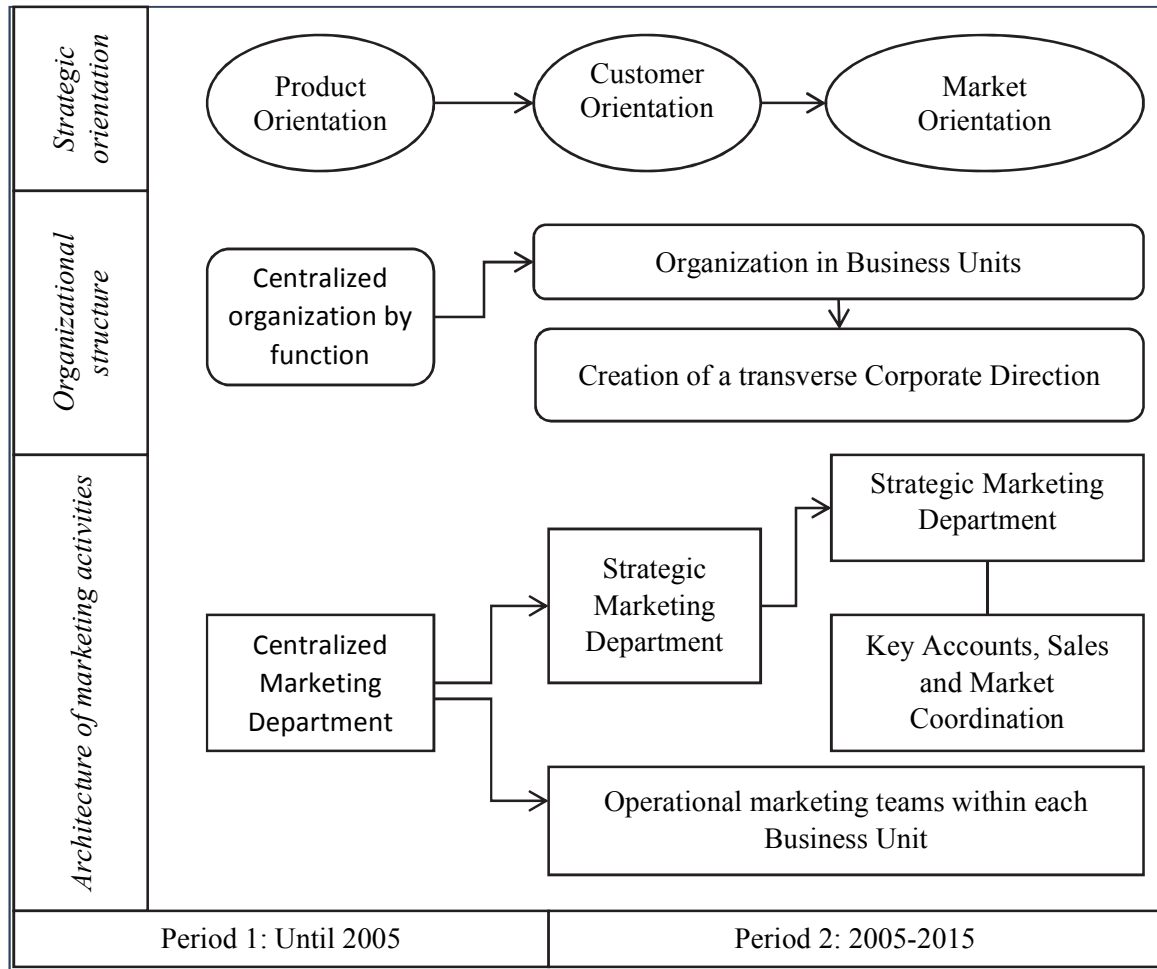
Laser is a leading company for financial and customer relations services. Company was founded in 1968 by a big French retailer to manage its financial activities. Between 1968 and 1985, Laser had difficulty finding satisfactory positioning and generating sufficient profitability. The company stabilized in the 1990s by combining its core business (revolving credits) with a policy of growth through partnerships. The period from 1995 to 2008 is characterized by a rapid development in France and Europe, due to successful diversification policy. The main business of the company was strengthened to allow the development of intermediation and customer relationship services, and call centers. In order to handle the rapid growth and to drive strategic change in 2005, the company decides to create a strategic marketing department, devised as a coordinating entity aiming to bring together the strategic objectives with the pursued marketing policy.

The qualitative data analysis process highlights the possibilities of organizational integration of both fields (marketing and strategy) in a single strategic marketing department, illustrating the main drivers of success and reasons for failure. Three main themes emerge from content analysis and as a result suggest that three decisive factors are playing a major role in the interactions between marketing and strategy: the consistency between strategic orientation and marketing activities structure, the delineation of the marketing activities scope and the role of the strategic marketing manager.

Consistency between Strategic Orientation and Marketing Activities Structure

Consistency between strategic orientation and the marketing activities structure appears to be the first factor of successful integration of marketing and strategy. Within Laser we observe two major periods of strategic orientation transformation, going together with deep changes in the organizational structures (See Figure 1). Each transformation of strategic orientation led the company to reconsider not only its overall architecture, but also that of its marketing activities.

FIGURE 1
STRATEGIC ORIENTATION, ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND ARCHITECTURE OF MARKETING ACTIVITIES



Period 1: From Product-Oriented to Customer-Oriented

Until 2005, Laser efforts were mainly concentrated on product and the sales force with a constant concern for financial gain in the short term.

“Laser at that time? We had a large variety of products... It was a kind of unclear accumulation, ten years ago Laser had no reality ... it was just product marketing.”

The group is structured by function, with a centralized marketing department. Its mission is to follow relationships with end customers recruited by retail subsidiaries. The core business of the company is revolving credit even if it starts to deploy gradually a range of loyalty products and services. Marketing teams are organized into small units in charge of a product-market development.

A wild diversification and rapid growth, hurried the strategic reorientation in the mid-2000s. Top management reassessed its strategic vision focusing no longer on the product, but on the client.

“Strategic models of our company are outdated. Today, a different kind of competition structures the market. Corporate strategies must integrate the client philosophy. This movement is far from over and it will go faster.”

The reorganization slowly emerged under the influence of this new vision. The restructuring was accomplished by moving from a centralized structure to an organization of the firm in strategic business units (SBUs).

“We had a product organization structure with a management by type of product. However, our products range was constantly growing. Then we said, we should establish a business unit organization, to manage all these various activities. There will be a retail stores business unit, a customer financial services business unit, and so on. Therefore, we set up several business units, with a sort of autonomous management.”

At the head of the three new SBUs, Laser adopts a common centralized direction, called Corporate Direction. It contains all the coordinating departments - accounting, human resources, IT, and a strategic marketing department. The emergence of a strategic marketing division is expected to carry out the coordination between marketing units operating within each SBU, corporate executives and senior management.

“We have created a strategic marketing department, because it was a time when ... we had a very large range of products, and the strategic marketing department was supposed to extract a long-term marketing and develop the business unit organization.”

The new architecture of Laser offers a new vision of marketing, mainly cross-functional and coordinating.

Period 2: From Customer-Orientation to Market-Orientation

The split into business units and the creation of a pilot cross-marketing unit were consistent with the transformation of strategic orientation. Since 2005, the emergence of a new growth driver – business partners, and the intensification of competition has been the starting point of a new change in strategic orientation.

“Some major issues have become very important for us, since we have two types of clients: business partners and end customers.”

This broader view of the customer, including final consumer, but also key accounts, challenges the traditional organizational model. A shared vision of moving from a predominant customer-orientation to a wider orientation, combining concern about customers, key accounts, partners, and competition is taking place progressively.

“The transformation of the marketing culture of Laser is underway. It results in a decline of product marketing, in favor of a completely new model.”

From a global point of view, the organization in three autonomous SBUs with a coordinating corporate management is efficient and does not undergo any major change. Nevertheless, within the strategic marketing department, a second corporate entity is created to coordinate all the major Laser partners. The mission of the new corporate entity is to contribute to the enhancement and knowledge of retail partners.

“The issue of coordination of our key accounts is different, with respect to the specificity of customer knowledge considered as necessary. The promotion of this new competence is undertaken in order of be more reactive with our key partners.”

The restructuring of marketing activities is now consistent with the desire of the top management to become a market-oriented company. However, this change in the company structure appears to be a particularly sensitive in many ways. First, because sharing resources across a firm's departments is difficult and second, because the already controversial interactions between strategic and operational marketing managers are strengthened. This result underlines the need of better definition of the scope of marketing activity.

The Delineation of the Scope of Marketing Activities

The creation of a strategic marketing department is in line with the desire to lead the company towards a deeper consideration of customers in a broader sense. The choice to split the two parts of the

marketing activities - strategic and operational, results in a more precise delimitation of the role of strategic marketing at corporate level and marketing strategies at SBU level.

“The issue relative to the intervention scope of each one is urgent. We need a clearer role definition and an internal organization simplifying the information exchange.”

Within Laser, three key factors distinguish these two parts of the marketing. The first factor involves the term of decision-making. Operational activities are considered to have scope only in the short term, while strategic issues are systematically oriented toward long-term issues. The role of marketing in each SBU is largely perceived by managers as having an operational outcome. In the short term, priorities are usually financial. All decisions and actions are turned to an optimal management of the combination costs-profits and an optimization of the profitability. While, strategic marketing encompasses prospecting, reflection and analysis of markets. In the long term, the prerogatives are relative to innovation and market knowledge.

“In general, strategic marketing is truly illustrating the most important long-term trends. The probable reason of its trouble is that senior managers are focused on short-term and financial problems.”

The second underlying factor refers to the orientation of the decisions and management practices. The activities of strategic marketing teams are turned inwards - to other functional groups and outwards - to the market. Managers monitor market trends and observe consumer and competitor behavior, and then relay the information gathered to internal stakeholders (line managers, top managers). The strategic marketing department is a platform for exchanging internal and external information.

“Strategic marketing department has some real advantages, based on its position in corporate organization. This entity is certainly the most promising value in terms of cross-functional coordination in Laser.”

Marketing teams within each SBU are endowed with vast decision-making power relative to positioning strategies and business development. Entirely oriented towards the market, these teams are supposed to design an offer generating short-term profitability for the company.

“Strategic marketing is a supporting entity, it is not a controlling entity. We do not have any decision power. Today, operational managers are taking decisions.”

The third aspect is relative to key success factors (KSF). The creation of a strategic marketing pole aims a better definition of the KSF at corporate level. The ambition of the entity is to develop monitoring and analysis instruments, to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of Laser, faced with the market opportunities. It is also gradually developing a proactive strategic marketing, mostly based on the non-articulated customer needs and stimulating proactive business performance through technological innovation.

“Strategic marketing team activity was rapidly growing. We had some strategic marketing people charged with market studies. They were working to capture customer, competitor or largely ... environment trends; we have created a business project team, working on new projects and innovation. Our decision support team, worked a bit ... it was things like, data mining, prospective data, and scores. Finally, we have integrated to the strategic marketing department a full-sized team working on key account coordination and corporate communication. That is the new strategic marketing department, our new division.”

In parallel, the marketing teams within each SBU are intended to position the offer and to ensure the commercial and financial success of business.

The Role of the Strategic Marketing Manager

This case illustrates the fundamental, but controversial role of a strategic marketing director. Laser had two successive leaders at the head of the strategic marketing department.

“In fact, we are in a situation where everything is depending on the personality of the strategic marketing head of department. Our first top manager was a hyper marketing man, but very dominating. The second head of department is someone more “soft”, he is more like a counsel, cooperating with each other.”

Despite a stake in the executive committee, both of them failed to unify teams, and even more to involve all employees in the objective of creating value for customers. Their operational experience and strong commitment to the short term values resulted in a biased perception of the nature of strategic marketing. The apparent tensions between strategic vision and operational vision, resulted in strong approbation of operational marketing, whose issues and results are more obvious. These partialities lead strategic marketing managers to deny their strategic identity and their different mission as compared to operational managers.

“Strategic marketing head of department was definitely not a “strategic” person, he was a “field” person, but not strategic. He dropped some good ideas but not strategic ideas.”

Another emergent theme is about failures in the exchange of information. The head of strategic marketing is supposed to be a bottom-up and top-down information relay. Its participation in the executive committee allows him to have a direct look at strategic decisions. However, very little valuable information passes through this filter.

“Today strategic marketing chief officer is insufficiently involved in the Executive Committee and the top-down information is not enough. This shortfall creates a real discomfort among employees; they are frequently under pressure.”

Finally, the authoritarian management of strategic marketing managers is underlined, but counterbalanced by marginal decision-making power. The powerful financial vision in Laser goes with a contradictory situation of marketers. They usually hold little discretion in decision-making, which they try to counterweigh with directive management of their teams. Within the strategic marketing team, ambiguity - high hierarchical position but low weight in decision-making, results often in a high turnover of some team managers.

DISCUSSION, MANAGERIAL AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

From a managerial point of view, the relationship between marketing and strategy raises some questions. Is the creation of a strategic marketing department a sufficient condition to involve the marketing function to corporate strategy objectives? Is the organization of marketing in line with the strategic orientation? What is the role of the strategic marketing department in coordination and decision-making? These questions are very important for executives in the light of an uncertain environment. Organizational issues are usually out of sight in marketing departments, more concerned with immediate matters. They are nevertheless significant in the business success and development.

The longitudinal analysis of the strategic marketing department in Laser is relevant and useful in many aspects. This study encompasses some key elements of the literature on strategic marketing and explores the organizational approaches in the marketing field. It turns out that in the previous academic work, strategic marketing has been mostly discussed from a conceptual point of view, while organizational approaches only address the structure of marketing activities at business unit level. The most significant contribution of this work is the theoretical and empirical assessment of a relationship between strategic marketing and marketing architecture at corporate level. It illustrates the practical possibilities of organizational integration within a single department of all marketing activities considered as being strategic for the company. These findings are reinforced by three additional implications.

First, this study extends the findings of previous research on the relationship between the organization of marketing function and strategic orientation of the firm. In respect with Vorhies and Morgan (2003), to improve strategy implementation and achieve superior performance, managers should organize marketing activities in different ways depending on their business strategy. Our findings suggest that configuration theory approaches are valuable also in the strategic marketing field. In particular, the consistency between strategic orientation and marketing activities structure appears to be the first factor of successful integration of marketing and strategy. In line with Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2000) conclusions, we observe a global transition from product centered organization to broader customer focused organization of the company. This process goes together with a deep reorganization of the structure of the marketing department separating strategic and operational activities. However, this case study goes

further because it shows that the creation of a strategic marketing department at corporate level is a way to support strategic change, particularly in organizations moving from product-centered to extensive customer-centered orientation. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that the creation of a strategic marketing department at corporate level in market-oriented companies can be a barrier to an optimal transmission of ascending and descending information. In general, market-orientation is associated with a greater dispersion of marketing activities to involve effectively a wide set of competencies, and a corporate marketing department is slightly consistent with marketing orientation (Lamberti and Noci, 2009).

In addition, the case study has deepened our understanding and enabled the empirical analysis of the concept of strategic marketing. Strategic marketing is often poorly understood and difficult to circumscribe both for practitioners and for researchers in marketing. These findings illustrate the organizational scope, or in any case, provide an initial overview of the strategic marketing perimeter and differentiate it from marketing strategy. In particular, strategic marketing has a role to play in cross-functional coordination and has an ability to better define the key success factors at corporate level. Strategic marketing encompasses mainly long-term organizational issues, market and competitive concerns (Varadarajan, 2010). We can also underline the predominantly proactive orientation of strategic marketing activities. In parallel, the split, operational / strategic marketing is important in terms of resource control and amount of investments accorded to corporate, SBU and operational level activities (Piercy *et al.*, 1997).

Finally, this field research brings to view the very ambiguous situation of the strategic marketing managers and their heads of department. The role of the strategic marketing director is fundamental, since he has to balance between operational and strategic marketing managers, between corporate and business level managers. Furthermore, strategic marketing managers are perceived as being an indispensable part of strategic and innovation projects. However, some paradoxical conclusions become apparent. Corporate marketing managers assume the role of specialists in their field and accompany strategic decision rather than influencing it significantly (Kumar, 2004). Moreover, the strategic marketing director is endowed with low decision power despite his high hierarchical position. Obviously, the separation of strategic and operational marketing activities is a starting point for many tensions between the strategic marketing director and his operational counterparts. These conclusions are in line with some studies demonstrating a decline in the power of marketing directors in favor of CFOs and account managers (Nath and Mahajan, 2008). Despite the participation of the strategic marketing director in the executive committee, it appears that the CEO, the CFO and the human resource manager have a prominent place.

CONCLUSION

This work suggests developing a better understanding of the role played by the strategic marketing department through the highlighting of three major drivers of success. First, it is necessary that the structure of marketing activities is well suited to the strategic orientation of the company. Likewise, the scope of activity and the tasks of each actor in the marketing function must be sufficiently formalized to avoid tensions. Finally, the company needs a more dynamic and formalized exchange of information. One of the central actors in the dissemination of information and in promoting the strategic marketing team is the leader of the department. The success of the strategic marketing plan is conditional on its capacity to value the team contribution.

The main limit of this research is the use of a single case analysis. This strongly affects the generalizability of results. However, the choice to conduct observations in a single organization has the advantage to allow a deep and longitudinal understanding of integration processes of marketing and strategy. The proposed subject could be explored by replicating the analysis grid in the case of another or several companies with a strategic marketing department. This would support the results and refine theoretical constructs. The analysis of several companies, comparable in terms of the architecture of the marketing activities, may also simplify comparisons and the extraction of recommendations in the form of "best practices".

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