

Conceptualizing Actor Engagement Management

Storbacka Kaj, Jaakkola Elina, Nenonen Suvi, Alexander Matthew

Purpose: Despite the rapid increase of research on engagement, important knowledge gaps pertain to firms' possibilities to influence or manage engagement, especially regarding stakeholders beyond customers. The purpose of this paper is to delineate the concept of actor engagement management (AEM) and to use this conceptual framework to identify contextual contingencies for AEM. Drawing on Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), Harmeling et al. (2017) and Brodie et al. (2019), we define actor engagement as a dynamic and iterative process that reflects actors' dispositions to invest resources, going beyond financial patronage, in their interactions with other relevant actors in the ecosystem.

Study methodology/approach: Our research approach was designed to overcome two main challenges in the current literature: the fragmentation of the engagement research and the lack of research addressing how actor engagement can be managed. We conducted a conceptual theory synthesis (Jaakkola 2020) aimed at achieving conceptual integration across multiple theories or literature streams and offer a new or enhanced view of the phenomenon. This was done by linking extant research on customer and/or actor engagement with insights from various customer relationship marketing and management, stakeholder, and network management research streams, using resource-based theory as our theoretical framing.

Findings: We conceptualize AEM as the purposeful activities/process of stimulating actors to contribute resources towards a specific goal. In our conceptual framework, we focus on setting AE goals, designing the AE process, and stimulating and responding to AE. The developed conceptualization i) applies to diverse actors, ii) provides insight on the nature of AEM activities, and iii) outlines contextual contingencies that influence which activities are relevant and suitable.

Practical implications. For managers, this study provides an actionable set of activities suitable for driving innovation. Any initial idea is not endowed with autonomous power and only moves if it interests other actors. Hence, the fate of innovation lies in the hands of a set of active actors that may react to newness in different ways. AEM is a central set of activities that support the success of systemic innovation, including market innovation, by influencing key actors.

Originality/value: Extant research exploring firms' possibilities to influence engagement is currently restricted to a firm's marketing function (Harmeling et al. 2017). This research is the first to define how engagement by versatile actors can be managed in different market situations. Compared to stakeholder management that is predominantly a unidirectional activity, AEM offers a more dynamic approach accommodating the multi-directional, network aspects of engagement.

Key words: Actor engagement, market innovation, systemic innovation.