

Linking Content to Process: How Mental Models of the Customer Enhance Creative Strategy Processes

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Abstract

We at Schindl Rughase Partners consider customers to be the most relevant source of information for guiding the strategy process. For this reason, we have developed an analytical tool – called STORYLISTENING – which helps managers to explore the “world of the customer”. Using a narrative approach, this instrument expands the insights of research findings from the so-called Cognitive School in strategic management. STORYLISTENING, introduced as a consulting tool in 1997, has already been used in numerous business applications in engineering, financial services, publishing, consulting, trading, personnel services, and manufacturing firms. In this chapter of Anne Huff’s and Mark Jenkins’ book “Mapping Strategic Knowledge” we provide one case example as an indication of how this knowledge tool can be used to facilitate strategic change.

Identifying Pitfalls in the Strategic Learning Process

The Cognitive School in strategic management has gained importance in recent years with empirical findings and theory now widely recognized by both academics and practitioners. One important branch of the Cognitive School takes a subjective, interpretative view of strategy and information processing (e.g. Daft & Weick 1984). Recently, this branch has become increasingly recognized in strategic management research (e.g. Walsh 1995, Kemmerer & Narayanan 2000).

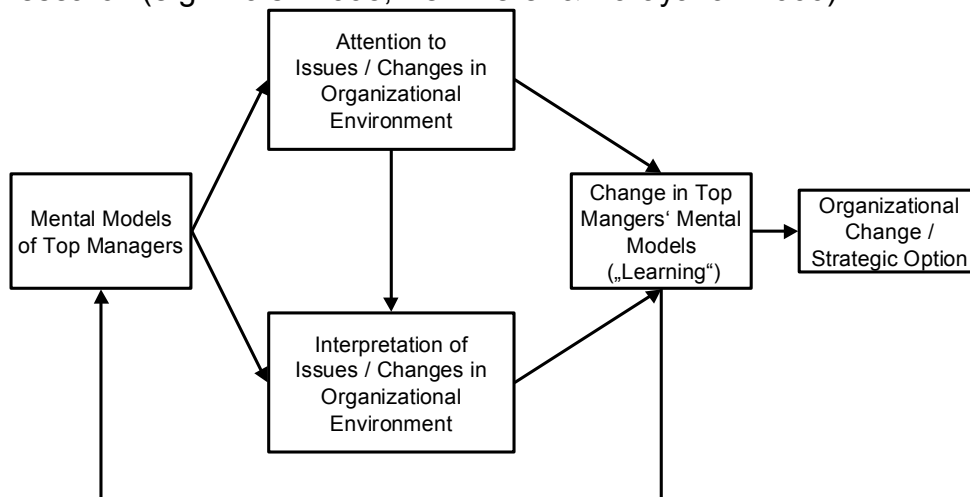


Figure 1: A Cognitive Model for Organizational Change
Based on Barr et. al. 1993

Cognitive researchers using an interpretive approach have developed a number of models to describe how managers and organizations deal with highly significant

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information. In 1983, Dutton et al. proposed that an interpretation (diagnosis) of strategic issues has three elements: inputs (such as cognitive maps, political interests or issue characteristics), process (recursiveness, retroductivity and heterarchy) and outcomes (such as assumptions, cause-effect understanding, predictive judgements).

Interpretation is the key factor that links changes in strategic action to changes in top managers' reading of the environment (Dutton & Jackson 1987). Many researchers, including Barr, Stimpert and Huff (1993) propose that organizational renewal depends on learning, which means additions to or changes of managers' mental models (see Fig. 1). These mental models and interpretations may change in a recursive process, for example by redefinition of meanings after receiving additional information. As a result, the process of data (issue) interpretation is seen as less systematic and unidirectional as it is when derived from purely rationalistic schools (Dutton et al. 1983). Nevertheless, interpretation of strategic alternatives affects what commitments are made in organizations.

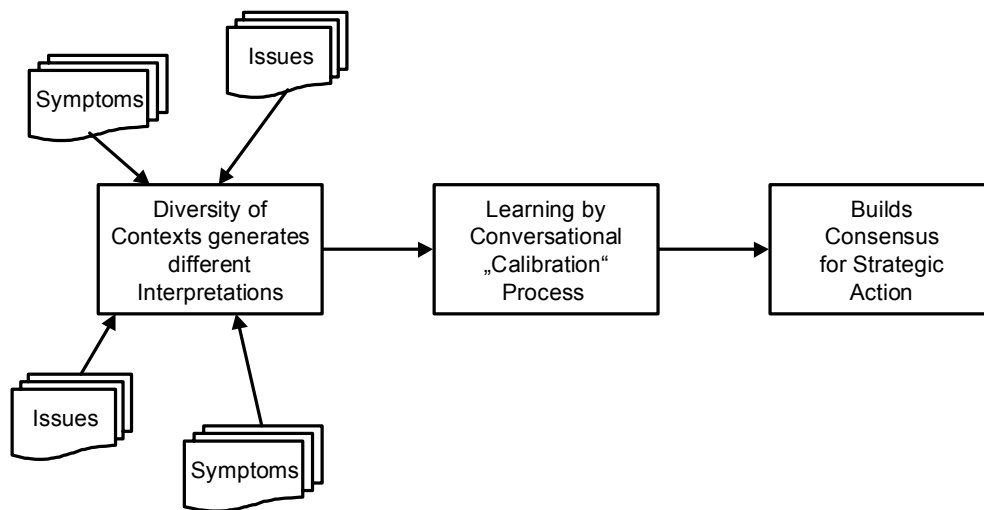


Figure 2: The Strategy Learning Process

Despite theoretical and empirical contributions, there has been little effort to integrate analytical tools (for example environmental scanning, market research, competitor analysis) into a cognitive strategy model with the aim of combining content and process. For instance, Eden and Ackermann (1998) developed techniques to facilitate strategic conversations in order to enhance strategic action in organizations. But as with most techniques, they tend to stick to the “inside-out” perspective. Van der Heijden (1996) similarly uses the scenario-technique as a powerful learning tool for managers to enable strategy creation by creative interpretations. He refers mainly to external scenarios which are derived from managers' shared and agreed upon mental models of the external world (“inside-out” perspective). A striking blind spot, theoretical as well as empirical, involves the inattention to customers as an ‘outside’ source of information.

How can it be sufficient only to learn within a defined group, within limited contexts? Learning in regard to strategy development is a discovery-driven process which definitely needs additional information (content) for an in-depth understanding of changes in the environment – both from inside (e.g. core competences) and outside of the organization (e.g. trends, markets, environment). Change of a manager's

mental model or an addition to it is very unlikely without any specific external or internal trigger of information (content).

At first glance, this challenge seems to be easy to cope with. But what exactly does trigger the learning process? As shown in Fig. 2, top managers face many issues and symptoms. In almost every industry, typical symptoms or issues might be that

- purchase pattern of customers become unpredictable,
- target groups are disappearing after a short period of time,
- competitive advantages are non-persistent,
- revenue decrease dramatically,
- a new competitor has changed the “rules of the game”, etc.

In responding to these issues and symptoms, each manager draws on different personal experiences and knowledge, which in turn respond to a diversity of contexts that exist in the minds of the managers. This diversity of contexts generates different interpretations about issues, symptoms, events, and situations. Multiple interpretations based on different contexts are then being discussed within the group of top managers (and beyond) by “calibrating” their underlying assumptions. Do the contexts lead to different meanings? Are these contexts related to each other? This conversational “calibration” process is not necessarily a formal process. “Often much more important is the informal ‘learning’ activity, consisting of unscheduled discussions, debate and conversation about strategic questions that goes on continuously at all levels in the organisation.”(van der Heijden 1996, p. 273). Following this important process, top managers build consensus for strategic action based on an agreed in-depth understanding of issues and symptoms.

In practice this learning process harbors three major pitfalls. First, there are possibly *no diversity of contexts* among the top managers at all. That does not mean that homogenous contexts are counter-productive for holding an appropriate strategic position in general, but homogeneity is unlikely to lead to a learning process or to strategic change. From our consulting experience, some currently successful companies get stuck in this situation for too long, as they tend to read the environment only through their (still) profitable products, processes and outcomes.

Second, there is perhaps a *lack of contexts* among the top managers. Very often managers are surprised by unmanageable consumers, which show unpredictable buying behaviour and by societal demands, which were formerly unknown. At that very moment, managers lack appropriate contexts in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the issues.

Third, top managers may have *no willingness or ability to drive a conversational “calibration” process*. In fact, many discussions and debates are limited to an exchange of superficial statements. Accordingly, managers may persuade others, but do not convince them. On the contrary, a conversation is based on an exchange of contexts and related arguments in order to “understand” your conversation partner and to find solutions and/or a level of common agreement. If managers don’t calibrate their contexts, strategy implementation is likely to fail, because different interpretations (creating hidden agendas) allow inconsistent strategic action by the management team.

As contexts play a major role in the learning process, the Cognitive School typically sees analytical tools in a sceptical way, because many of these tools are still embedded into an orderly strategic planning framework. Planning models approach strategy development as a designed and conscious process that must be kept simple (e.g. Andrews 1987, Eden & Ackermann 1998). However, as revealed by many researchers, this traditional strategic planning concept has been proven to be inappropriate in times of hypercompetition (e.g. Mintzberg 1994, Brown & Eisenhardt 1998). Moreover, these analytical tools tend to provide lots of numbers (for example market share, turnover, customer satisfaction measures). The quantitative data tends to be seen as conclusions which present an “objective” view of the world. Very often, this information exclude contexts which are actually needed.

The Case Study: A Wholesale Firm

In order to elucidate the shortcomings of many efforts at strategy development, the following case study gives an example of a company that initially lacked contexts to understand the data that was available to them. The company is a german wholesale firm offering articles that can only be differentiated to a certain degree. At the time we were first involved with the firm it was faced with decreasing profit margins and disappearing target groups. The customer base included large to small businesses which needed the products for further processing. The competitive environment in this market can be described as an oligopoly – relatively constant over many years.

The Top Management Team (TMT) was trapped in pitfall number two of the learning process previously described: they were surprised by symptoms and issues, and the team lacked appropriate contexts to make sense of them. In order to cope with these demanding issues the TMT wanted to a) find new products and services for their existing target groups and b) differentiate from their competitors. As an increasing number of their customers were turning away, the TMT decided to begin with their existing and lost customers by initiating a customer satisfaction survey. The wholesale company interviewed about 2,500 representative customers by a standard questionnaire.

Competitor is ...	much better	better	even	poor	very poor
Competitor A	1,63%	11,41%	21,74%	1,09%	0%
Competitor B	1,63%	10,86%	15,76%	2,17%	0%
Competitor C	0,54%	3,53%	8,42%	1,36%	0%
Competitor D	0,83%	2,72%	8,15%	0,82%	0%
Competitor E	0,27%	2,45%	4,35%	0,27%	0%
Total	4,90%	30,97%	58,42%	5,71%	0%

Similar to the symptoms, the results of this survey were extremely surprising to the TMT. 91.4% of their customers were “always satisfied” or “mostly satisfied” with the company’s performance. 7.7% of the customers rated the performance “variable” and only 0.9% were “mostly unsatisfied”. In contrary, as can be seen in Fig. 3, 35.87% of the customers

Figure 3: Customer Satisfaction with Competitors

classified competitors “much better” or “better”. 58.42% classified the competitor’s performance as “even” and only 5.71% considered competitors “poor” compared to their current supplier. In addition to these irritating outcomes, the TMT got lots of ambiguous data about specific topics. For example, in some cases, the frequency of

field service visits was too high. On the other hand, many customers were asking for additional service and sales support. As a result, the TMT ended up with more questions than they originally had – and were still lacking contexts to understand the issues highlighted by the survey.

There was one piece of apparent good news: the TMT was reassured that their company was often able to satisfy its customers. However, the data seemed to suggest that they no longer had any sustainable competitive advantages. Even more dramatic, conflicting information made a search for new products and services almost impossible for the TMT.

How can an analytical tool be created to support the mental process of strategy development and implementation under conditions like these? Schindl Rughase Partners tries to develop analytical tools that reflect the insights of the research findings of the Cognitive School in strategic management. The key seems to be to link content to process.

STORYLISTENING: A Story-Based Tool for Strategic Analysis

We developed an analytical approach that brings content into a strategy process by considering the interpretation and learning process. We consider the customer to be the most relevant source of information for strategy processes. Firms need to annex the “thinking of the customer” with their own thinking to strategically position products and services in the future. Porter (1980) already claimed that uniqueness does not lead to differentiation unless it is valuable to the consumer. In other words: competitive advantages are only created in the minds of the customers. To develop innovative products and services, companies need to find what customers will value in the future. But there is a significant difference between what customers want and what they need. In fact, companies have to provide something the customer would like to have, even though he never knew that he was looking for it, but afterwards telling that he always wanted to have it when he finally gets it (Liebl 2000). For this reason, it is necessary to understand the “world of the customer” in detail, in order to surprise the customer with valuable products and services he never thought of before.

Of course, managers already have a mental model about the customer and his “world” according to their experiences with customers and other information. But from our experience, these models are likely to be incomplete. Managers tend to focus only on those parts of the “world of the customer” which are directly linked with their existing business. In addition, the mental map is often inaccurate, because managers are often left to indirect information sources. In consequence, an analytical tool should give managers food for thought in order to change their mental models about the “world of the customer” or enhance them with elements which they “learn” from the customer. Our analytical approach – which is called STORYLISTENING – helps managers to explore the “world of the customer” by making patterns within this “world” visible. In addition, our analytical approach gives a deep understanding for customer behavior and customer attitudes.

A critical element in acquiring an in-depth understanding of the customer is the stories they tell (Liebl 1999). Positive and negative stories of the customer represent unique experiences with organizations, and thereby form a strategic identity of the

organization (Gabriel 2000). Actually, there are many techniques that describe a customer's perception and expectations, including buying criteria (Porter 1980) and experiences of customer value (Woodruff 1997). But single techniques are barely able to describe a complex competitive advantage based on a set of different activities, services, attributes or values which are in interaction with each other (Porter 1996).

Storytelling, on the other hand, is the "preferred sensemaking currency of human relationships" (Boje 1991). Among customers and organizations it is an excellent candidate for connecting more specific techniques. Empirical evidence shows that information has significant impact on judgements and understanding when it is conveyed in the form of a narrative. For example, Pennington and Hastie's (1992) research focused on the role of stories in making juridical decisions. They found out that participants favored the side (prosecution or defence) whose testimony was set up in story-order. The participants were also more confident of their decisions when the testimonies were in story-order than when they were not. Adaval and Wyer (1995) made the same findings with consumers, who estimated the attractiveness of vacations described in two different travel brochures. Customers generally preferred a narrative form of the events to a simple list of features. An example of using storytelling in strategic management is given by 3M (Shaw et. al. 1998). Stories are used to replace abstract business plans by narrative texts to further employees' comprehension and sustainable commitment.

Stories not only matter in information processing, but also in remembering (Bartlett 1932). As Schank and Abelson (1995) claim, all of the important knowledge that people acquire and retain in memory is based on stories constructed around past experiences. What's more, the "content of story memories depends on whether and how they are told to others, and these reconstituted memories form the basis of the individual's *remembered self*" (Schank & Abelson 1995, p. 1). In other words, "stories provide the basis for (a) comprehending new experiences; (b) making judgements and decisions about the persons, objects, and events to which the story refer; and (c) developing general attitudes and beliefs concerning these referents" (Adaval & Wyer 1998, p. 208). Stories not only represent detailed descriptions of perceptions, they elicit values as well as the identities of storytellers (Conway 1996, Meyer 1995, Taylor 1996). Frames and meanings can be identified as well as the background of motivation and acting. This is particularly important in order to understand the customer's perception in-depth. Further, stories are easy to receive from the customer. It is by far easier for the customer to tell stories than to transfer their experiences into abstract value categories of questionnaires.

In order to absorb customers' stories, our analytical instrument, STORYLISTENING, contains qualitative elements which are heavily influenced by cognitive science. An in-depth interview (narrative/problem-oriented) represents the heart of the instrument (Patton 1990, Witzel 1985). This in-depth interview contains elements of ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979, Woodruff & Gardial 1996) and elements of means-end theory (Reynolds & Gutman 1988, Claeys et. al. 1995).² During these

² In specific cases the qualitative interview is followed by a quantitative questionnaire. Sometimes the management would like to verify certain competitive advantages, which they think are playing a major role to the customer. The interviewer will then present only those questions to the interviewee, which were not covered in the qualitative part of the interview. Using a special way of questioning based on Kano (1984) and Berger et. al. (1993), these results indicate whether the described performance

interviews, customers are given the opportunity to express their experiences in their own words (stories). Within these stories, customers tell about their perceptions, the way they use the product or service, general beliefs and especially how they perceived their experiences by describing related meanings and motivations.

For example, one customer of the wholesale firm we are using for a case study told us the following story (extract): “Well ... *[pause – 30 seconds]* Yes, a can remember a remarkable story! Just three months ago, we had severe problems with one of their products. We had – as always – a time-critical order by one of our best customers. Only two days before the day of delivery, we found out that 5 tons of the required material in stock had a bad quality and that it was impossible to process it with our machines. These problems occur from time to time in our industry, but normally we check immediately the quality when we get the material. Now, we really had a problem! First of all, the whole production plan was in danger – our machines need to run 24 hours. But not only that, especially this customer is always very pig-headed when it comes to delays. My boss put me under enormous pressure to solve the problem. First thing I did, I called the wholesaler and explained him the situation. You know, we are not a big customer and 5 tons are extremely difficult to get within one day, even for a professional wholesaler. What to say – they got it fixed in only one day. What a job! I can't tell you how happy I was. *[laughing]* Thanks to Mr. Lange, who took care of it immediately, we didn't loose one of our best customers. I mean, the way he handled it was very professional; just a few questions and Mr. Lange knew what to do. In my opinion, that really makes a difference and really surprised me. *[pause – 1 minute]* You know, talking is cheap in our industry – everybody promises anything. But what really counts is that you can rely on your supplier, who knows you and will help you in critical situations. Most of the wholesalers just want to sell, I mean, I understand that, but afterwards they don't care anymore. Loosing a good customer can bring us into a tough situation. However, on that particular evening I bought a bottle of champagne, went home a little bit early, and shared the rest of the evening with my family. *[pause – 15 seconds]* Hey, talking about wholesalers that brings me to another topic...”

Customers know many stories to tell that are referring to experiences with certain products, services or companies. During these stories customers change topics quickly, ask themselves (and give answers), or jump from beliefs to associations to other related stories. Normally, such an interview takes from 45 minutes up to 1 ½ hours. Of course, all interviewees are kept anonymus. There is no written guide or manual for the interviewer. The interviewer needs to be well-trained and experienced in passive interview techniques, such as supportive or describing questions (“Did I understand you right ...?” or “Could you descibe to me what do you mean by ...?”), as the interviewee should ideally talk over 95 percent of the time. All interviews are tape-recorded, so the interviewer can focus on the customer and the development of the narrative instead of making notes.

There are two important indicators for the success of these non-standardized interviews. The first indicator is given by the customer himself. After describing detailed perceptions, beliefs, complex associations, meanings and motivations, in many cases customers do not know what has happened during the talk. A common feedback of the customers is: “It was real fun and somehow interesting, but all I did

would be perceived as a 'must-be' or as an 'attractive' element. The quantitative results should only be interpreted together with the results of the qualitative interviews.

was talk. There was no structure at all. I doubt that you will get anything concrete from that!" In fact, that is the best feedback you can get when aiming to try to reveal the unconscious by means of an ethnographic interview. The second indicator is given by the interviewers. After a certain amount of interviews, they usually tend to say: "I am getting bored. Each time, I hear the same stories over and over again!" By then, you know that you are on the right track as patterns have already become visible.

Analyzing Story-Based Data

During evaluation, each qualitative interview is analyzed by an intersubjective, systematic, and focused content-analysis. During this process each story is deconstructed into its elements. The elements of the story are brought into relation to each other or into relation to other expressions, meanings, and motivations which were amplified by the customer.

In order to achieve this, every tape-recorded interview is analyzed three times by an especially trained analyst. The first time, the analyst tries to get a general understanding for the basic structure of the interview. The second time, the analyst begins to write down and draw all elements of the stories (in the words of the customer) on a blank sheet of paper using simple tools like a pencil and an india-rubber. The analyst relates the elements to each other as the customer creates linkages during the interview. This session is very time-consuming, as the analyst needs to constantly evolve and change an expanding network. The third time, the analyst verifies all the elements and completes details, which she/he might not have heard during the second session. In order to get intersubjective results, a other analysts run random tests to compare results. Through this process, a net of stories is created for each customer eliciting the contexts of his "worldview".

Having a such a validated network for each interview, the analysts begin to process a "qualitative content-analysis" (Mayring 1997). When comparing these single networks to each other, patterns become visible very quickly by creating categories for similar or equivalent contexts, descriptions, meanings, attitudes or perceptions. Usually, only 15 to 25 interviews per segment are sufficient to reveal detailed patterns (Bushko & Raynor 1997). These distinct patterns can be consolidated into detailed cognitive maps (Laukkanen 1998, Huff 1990). Not only are the elements within these cognitive maps important, but so are the relations between the elements. The relations depict the customer's associations and complex perception of unique values (e.g. competitive advantages). As a result, the analytical instrument STORYLISTENING provides cognitive maps which are networks of stories within the "world of the customer" – revealing values, attitudes and reasons of customers.

However, the instrument itself and its results are not sufficient to enhance the strategy process. In order to link content and process, these results are not presented to the managers as traditional research outcomes in a unidirectional way. Considering the use of stories for better information processing, many examples and voice-recorded sequences from different interviews are used to give managers the experience of detecting patterns themselves during a workshop. Step by step, the cognitive map as the result of the analytical tool is partly revealed to the managers, always accompanied by their own pattern construction of the voice-recorded sequences they have heard before. During this process, managers create a

piecemeal understanding of linkages within the cognitive map. In result, the complete cognitive map is (re)constructed by the management. Moreover, they begin to tell stories of their own experiences with customers, which are in accordance with some of these linkages. By then, you know that the information of the cognitive map has become useable knowledge for the management.

By the end of the workshop, managers are able to “read” and understand the cognitive maps in detail. Of course, many managers have heard a lot of stories and anecdotes from customers before, but redesigning these fragments and constructing linkages between them gives management a different perspective on the “world of the customer”. This is exactly the kind of information (content) that triggers the interpretation and learning process. In our consulting experience, the mental map of the customer is different from the mental map of the manager about the customer. Often the difference is considerable. We believe that important “outside-in” information is lacking if a strategy process only relies on “inside-out” perspectives.

However, differences between the mental maps of the customer and the mental maps of managers about the customers immediately bring new creative ideas and new opportunities to the minds of the managers. Our STORYLISTENING approach provides detailed information about the customer’s cognition, to enhance this learning process. The “outside-in” perspective interacts with the “inside-out” to create new knowledge from which new strategy can be generated.

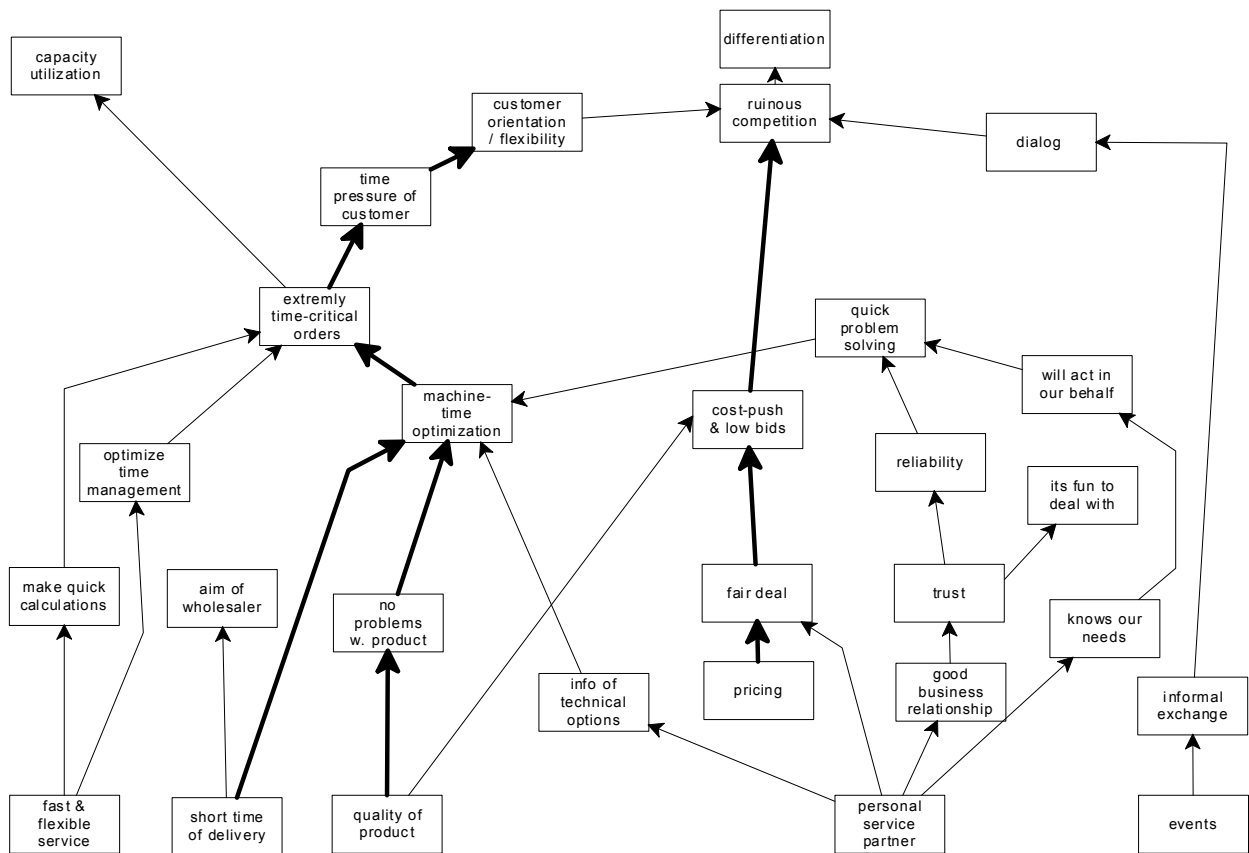


Figure 4: Causal Cognitive Map of Customers - Pattern I

Discussion of Results and the Strategic Learning Process in practice

To illustrate the outcomes of the analytical tool, we return to the case study. After accomplishing the customer satisfaction survey, the German wholesaler initiated a STORYLISTENING study in order to get contextual patterns by stories their customer tell. To get a selection of interviewees from their broad customer base, the company followed their existing segmentation by customer's company size and turnover. 30 customers were chosen within three different segments, plus 5 non-customers. Among customers and non-customers, interviews were made with the chief executive or the head of purchasing department. As a result of the interviews, we acquired two distinct cognitive maps (patterns) from the stories customers told (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). In addition, non-customers told stories in the same contextual patterns than the customers did. In consequence, there was no difference between customers and non-customers in regard with their existing "worldviews".

Usually cognitive maps are very complex. For the purpose of demonstration, the cognitive maps shown here are kept as simple as possible. For instance, all arrows in the maps are only cause-effect relations.³ Some arrows are bold indicating that these cause-effect relations were named by at least 85% of all interviewees who created this contextual pattern. The first pattern (Fig. 4) is based on narratives of 13 customers and the second pattern (Fig. 5) is derived from stories of 22 customers. In order to "read" the map, follow single paths of connected elements. For example Fig. 4 – take the starting element "quality of product". More than 85% of the customers were telling stories around these core cause-effect relations to the effect of (simplified): "The *quality of the product* is important, because we *don't* want to *have any problems* in the manufacturing process with the product due to our *machine time optimization*. This optimization is necessary, because we always get *extremely time-critical orders* by our customers. You need to know that our *customers* are always under enormous *time pressure* to get the final product. Therefore, we need to provide *flexibility* to our customers."

In accordance with our experiences, the TMT of the German wholesaler had a far different mental map about their customers. Most importantly, the TMT suddenly recognized that there were two contextual patterns (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) instead of one to be taken into account. The first contextual pattern (Fig. 4) was well known to the TMT. The customers in this pattern are under extreme competitive pressure. Perceiving their own business as highly standardized, this group of customers tries to achieve cost leadership by machine-time optimization and low purchasing costs in order to survive. This group mainly forced the wholesaler to lower prices – which raised the issue of decreasing profit margins.

³ Due to the purpose of the STORYLISTENING study, the linkages may also describe non-directive associations (A reminds me of B), time-order of elements (after A I make B), or relations (A is better/worse than B)

because their interest is focused on information about new, innovative products and actual market situations. Intense personal support would help them to improve their own service to end-users. In reality, however, current field service visits were limited to information about existing standard products so that even this group requested a reduction the frequency of personal visits.

Conclusions for Strategic Reorientation

The last task by the TMT was to build consensus for strategic action. They decided to give up their existing customer segmentation and replace it by the two segments that were detected by the storytelling approach. This decision was made to focus primarily on the second group of customers (Fig. 5), because their knowledge-based core competences allowed them to provide lots of new services and products, improving the customers' professional aims. Several reasons supported this decision, for example a) higher profit margins, b) no competitor in this field, c) increasing number of customers in the future, d) ruinous competition in other customer group leading to a decreasing customer base.

This dramatic change was made possible by annexing the “thinking of the customer” to the minds of the managers. The customers' contexts were a critical content in enhancing a creative strategy process (Fig. 6). The wholesaler gained substantially more than they would have by – for instance – just hiring a sales consultant to increase sales power in traditional customer segments. They finally found a new sustainable strategic position.

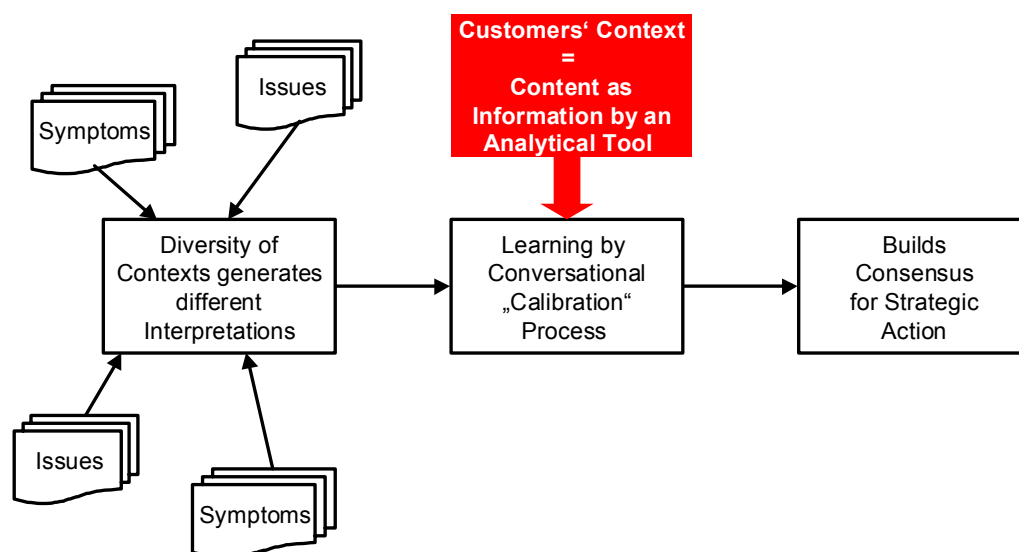


Figure 6: The Strategy Learning Process - Linking Content to Process

In conclusion, bringing content of analytical tools into a mental strategy process is necessary in order to combine “inside-out” and “outside-in” perspectives in strategic management. Analytical tools should be carefully adapted to the insights of the research findings of the Cognitive School. Experience has shown that in order to gain these contents the same methodologies and techniques can be used (such as cognitive mapping) as in the strategy process itself (see e.g. Eden & Ackermann 1998). These methodologies and techniques already consider the interpretative view

of information processing and they are suitable to demonstrate differences of interpretations from external sources, compared to managers inside the organization, triggering the learning process by conversational calibration.

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