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Article

B2B: A Shift from Owning to Sharing? - How Sharing Facilitates new Business-to-Business Relationships between Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

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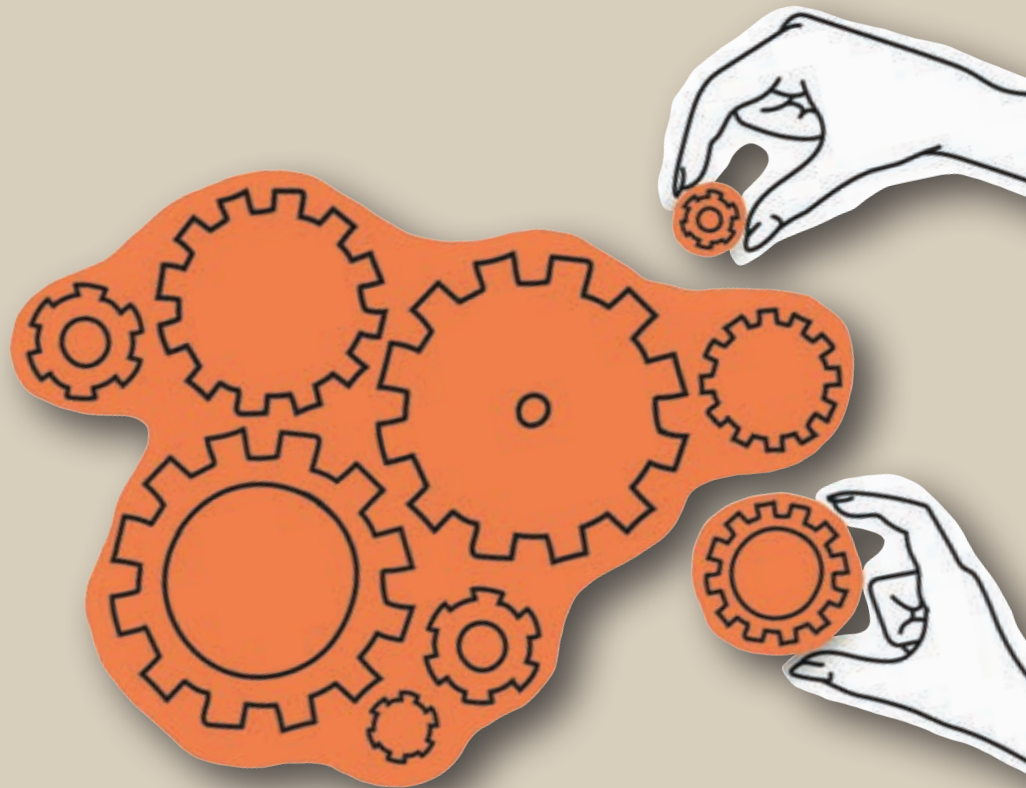
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Marketing Review St.Gallen

From Business
to Business



Schwerpunkt

Boring-2-Boring beenden – warum nicht! –
Wie die Credit Suisse dank konsequenter Ausrichtung an
Kunden-Insights ihre Marketingwirkung verbesserte

Kunden im Lösungsgeschäft – Welche Rolle spielen sie
und was macht Lösungen für Kunden effektiver?

Kundenlösungen als Signale – Warum Unternehmen am
Lösungsgeschäft festhalten sollten, auch wenn es nicht
profitabel ist

B2B: A Shift from Owning to Sharing? – How Sharing
Facilitates new Business-to-Business Relationships
between Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

Quo vadis, Aussendienst? – So erzeugt der
B-to-B-Aussendienst künftig Mehrwert

Spektrum

Marketing für die Kirche –
Interview mit Pater Martin Werlen

Peer-Pricing – Ein integrativer
Pricing-Ansatz in B-to-B-Märkten

New Public Management – Steigerung der
Serviceorientierung in Verwaltungen

B2B: A Shift from Owning to Sharing?

How Sharing Facilitates new
Business-to-Business Relationships
between Small and Medium-sized
Enterprises

The sharing economy has witnessed tremendous growth in a multitude of industries around the world. Little B2B sharing, however, can be observed in industry practice, although it provides attractive opportunities for SMEs. Findings from an applied research project suggest some prerequisites for SMEs that want to engage in sharing and offer several tools for implementation.

Sebastian Huber, Karina von dem Berge, Simona Burri, Prof. Dr. Uta Jüttner,
Prof. Dr. Toni Wäfler, Charles Huber, Luca Niederhauser

Frequent shipments of metal products to and from industrial customers all around Switzerland were a time-consuming and costly activity for CEO Tobias Schmid at the specialist engineering company Tschudin + Heid in Waldenburg, Switzerland. When neighbouring company RERO AG purchased a new delivery vehicle and its CEO Thomas Tschopp offered excess capacity on the van to deliver or collect some shipments on behalf of Tschudin + Heid, the two entrepreneurs quickly came to an agreement. Sharing the vehicle lowers the cost for both companies, creating a new B2B relationship that has led them to cooperate for their delivery services ever since.

With exponential growth in past years, the sharing economy has disrupted many business-to-consumer (B2C) industries and established itself as an alternative and relevant business model (Schlagwein et al., 2020). In contrast to individual consumers, businesses mostly participate in sharing as operators of the sharing platforms (Koetsier, 2015; Schwanholz & Leipold, 2020). However, important potential benefits with regard to economics and the ecology through B2B sharing remain untapped (Köbis et al., 2021) although engaging in the sharing economy “brings new working opportunities for individuals as well as for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); it impacts positively on environment and profitability; and helps SMEs to ensure their company’s survival” (Soltysova & Modrak, 2020, p. 9).

Motivators for B2B Sharing

At the core of sharing, resource ownership is substituted by access to increase utilization (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), resulting in “shared” usage. This more efficient use of resources replaces additional, individual ownership, creating economic sustainability at participating companies and the macroeconomic level (Daunorienė et al., 2015; Demary, 2014; Georgi et al., 2019). Cost savings in the

purchase, operation and financing of business resources and infrastructure (Esselin & Falkenberg, 2019) are complemented by ecological sustainability resulting from fewer purchases of new assets, which systematically avoids overproduction and depletion (Acquier et al., 2017). Especially the sharing of goods with a significant CO₂ footprint (e.g. trucks or industrial machinery) contributes positively towards energy efficiency and clean air (Pisaniello, 2018).

Specific sharing has been taking place in some industries for a long time; for example, airlines that code-share their seats with other airlines or the lending of tools and equipment in the construction industry. However, new opportunities arise from the use of digital technology (Eschberger, 2020) in, for example, logistics, production and medical equipment. A further promising area could be the sharing of personnel, as Zhang et al. (2019) elaborate. A key driver for B2B sharing is the access to resources that are used only infrequently (Eschberger, 2020). SMEs benefit particularly since sharing provides them with access to resources they could otherwise not afford (Soltysova & Modrak, 2020). Thus, sharing adds to the competitiveness of SMEs, just like other formats of cooperation such as cooperatives, co-creation or research partnerships, which are well established and researched (Melander & Arvidsson, 2021).

The higher the investment and operational cost of a resource, the more likely companies are willing to share it (Grondys, 2019; Vătămănescu & Alexandru, 2018). Machinery and equipment, stocks of raw materials, intermediate goods as well as ancillary and buffer stocks are suitable for B2B sharing at varying degrees (Grondys, 2019). With vertical integration decreasing, companies tend to specialize on their core competencies (cf. Langlois, 2001), which in consequence increases the opportunity for sharing as a means of access to resources outside of a company’s core competence.



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Challenges for B2B Sharing

Sharing resources with other businesses does not come naturally to companies in an environment based on competitiveness, rivalry, innovation and differentiation (Porter, 1997; Steininger et al., 2011) and thus is rarely built into business models (Daunorienė et al., 2015; Govindan et al., 2020). A wide range of factors and preconditions affects a company's propensity to participate in a sharing project or the sharing economy at large (Hong et al., 2014; Soltysova & Modrak, 2020). Companies need to consider the effort involved in sharing (search cost, access cost, multi-homing cost, building trust, reducing the risk of fraud etc.) on a transactional and strategic level (Antikainen et al., 2018; Weiber & Lichter, 2019).

The consumer-to-consumer (C2C) sharing economy heavily relies on network effects, critical mass, and scalability of digital platforms allowing for positive cross-side network effects: the more participants offer a resource, the more attractive the sharing for those in need of said resource becomes, and vice versa (Kumar et al., 2018). In B2B sharing, such network effects and commitment to a specific sharing platform are less apparent (Grondys, 2019; Muñoz & Cohen, 2018). Current research and first practical evidence from unsuccessful B2B sharing

platforms indicate that a mere transfer of digital, platform-based business models from C2C sharing concepts does not respond sufficiently to the actual operational needs of resource sharing for companies (Esselin & Falkenberg, 2019; Friederici et al., 2020; Laczko et al., 2019). B2B sharing platforms have struggled to create the necessary momentum, so one must consider the impact of sharing on the business model of participating companies before the choice of transaction and necessary intermediaries and technologies can be determined (Choi et al., 2014; Muñoz & Cohen, 2018).

Working with SMEs in an Action Research Project

Action research is a strategy of applied research that specifically generates theory from practice (Eden & Ackermann, 2018), being "research in action" more than research on or about action (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002). This specific methodology actively interacts with the system and data sources to solve a given, practical problem while creating new research insights for the academic body of knowledge (Gummesson, 2000) and allows a wide range of options often using case study research in a combination of artefacts, documents, surveys,

interviews, focus groups, discussions, observations, group work and performance monitoring (Hales et al., 2006).

Supported by the Swiss Federal Agency for Innovation Innosuisse and working with more than ten Swiss SMEs from asset-intensive industries, a research project at the Lucerne School of Business and the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland investigated the dynamics of B2B sharing between March 2019 and December 2021. It examined what motivates or inhibits sharing and developed new knowledge on the managerial action required for businesses to successfully shift from ownership to sharing. The research was conducted by an interdisciplinary team of seven researchers in collaboration with employees of Swiss SMEs from the industrial sector in three project phases, each time employing the typical cycle of action research consisting of data collection, data analysis, action planning and evaluation (cf. table 1).

Phase I – Identifying Resources and Partners for B2B Sharing

Phase I collected existing knowledge on B2B sharing from literature and previous industry experience from participating SMEs. It also aimed to determine the success factors for B2B sharing transac-

Table I: Matching Action Research (AR) Cycles with Project Phases

		AR iterations			
		Data collection	Goal of data analysis	Action planning (Tools)	Implementation & Evaluation
Project phases	Phase I	Structured literature analysis and semi-structured interviews	Identify critical success factors in the initiation phase	Partner matching and resource matching	Sharing clusters with matching resource interests
	Phase II	Co-creative workshop	Sharing prototypes	Sharing transaction planning	Sharing checklist
	Phase III	Focus group interview	Sharing transaction monitoring	Sharing transaction assessment	Assessment questionnaire

Source: Own illustration.

tions. In step (1) data collection, ten SME representatives shared their previous experiences with B2B sharing in 90-minute guideline-based interviews. For example, the lending and borrowing of measurement tools was repeatedly cited and explained. Meanwhile, the researchers conducted a literature review on the success factors and potentially suitable resources for B2B sharing. In step (2) data analysis, the researchers condensed the interview data and the results of the literature analysis into a morphological box with a list of critical success factors for initiating and implementing B2B sharing initiatives as well as a map to identify resources suitable for sharing. The analysis showed that a multitude of success factors with diverse characteristics influences the emergence of sharing transactions and makes matching for such transactions a complex undertaking. Subsequently, the identified success factors were validated and prioritised by the SMEs. In step (3) action planning, the 16 most important success factors were transferred into a diagnostic tool along with a resource map. In step (4) implementation, these tools were tested by the SMEs using their previous sharing experiences as examples. As a result, several clusters with similar resource interests emerged, supporting the development of sharing transactions. In step (5) evaluation, the researchers used the observations to evaluate and optimise both tools.

Phase II – Preparing and Enabling Sharing Transactions

Phase II identified sharing project prototypes. In step (1) data collection, needs for and offers of possible resources of the participating companies were collected with the help of the resource map. Step (2) data analysis then matched supply and demand between two or more SMEs via a guided dialogue by one of the researchers. According to the data collected, there was little potential for resource sharing among the participating SMEs. Consequently, the researchers developed an (3) action

plan, which enabled the identification of sharing project prototypes. In addition, a closed online platform for publishing resource requests and offers was developed and launched. In step (4) implementation, the researchers used the online platform to facilitate the exchange between SMEs to identify one sharing project prototype for each of them. Two SMEs identified the sharing of knowledge on digital marketing as a common interest, with one party in possession of said knowledge and willing to make it available, and one partner in need of such expertise. In step (5) evaluation the researchers compiled a checklist that included the obstacles and questions collected from the discussions on sharing prototypes to allow a more structured negotiation between future sharing partners.

Phase III – Evaluating B2B Sharing Success

The third phase accompanied and documented the sharing project prototypes while validating the tools. In step (1) data collection, the pairs of SMEs were accompanied in the initiation and implementation of sharing transactions. In the form of participant observation, all points of contact between the company representatives (e.g. e-mail communication, virtual and physical meetings) were time-recorded and documented. For example, there was an exchange by e-mail on the frequency of 3D-measuring a metal item. The SMEs producing the item with a need for precise measurements had to agree on the frequency with the other SME that had availability of the 3D measurement facility. Following each sharing transaction, both company representatives evaluated the sharing experience in a semi-structured interview with a researcher. In step (2) data analysis, a case description and data from the qualitative interviews were coded independently by two researchers to identify relevant aspects for successfully conducting resource sharing between

Management Summary

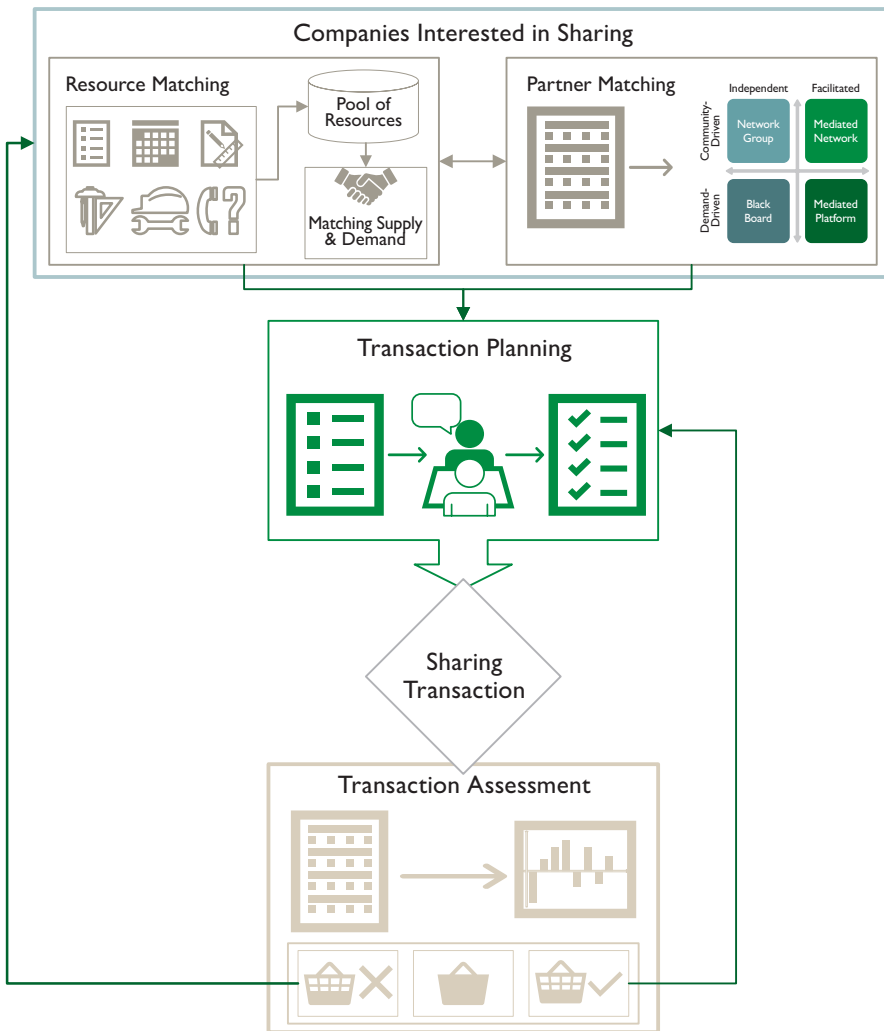
Sharing resources between SMEs offers substantial benefits; however, it requires dedicated managerial effort to be successful. Working with four tools of the B2B sharing toolbox, SMEs can (1) identify suitable resources, (2) match with a fitting partner company, (3) prepare their sharing transaction and (4) evaluate outcomes for repeat sharing. By sharing, SMEs can establish novel partnerships with their B2B counterparts, either monetising idle capacity or avoiding costly purchases of rarely used resources and improving their ecological footprint.

companies. The research team developed an evaluation questionnaire from that data in step (3) action planning. In step (4) implementation the SMEs used this questionnaire during two workshops to validate a revised version of the partner matching tool. The feedback from the company representatives on the two tools was reviewed by the research team in step (5) evaluation and appropriate adjustments were made to both tools.

B2B Sharing Toolbox

Four tools emerged from the research project on B2B sharing (cf. figure 1): Resource matching to identify resources which are suitable for sharing and provide SMEs with a common point of reference when discussing resources. Partner matching to profile an SME's attitude and expectations to swiftly spot suitable partners. Transaction planning to initiate the actual sharing of an identified resource (tool 1) between matching partners (tool 2) with the help of a checklist and management best practices. Transaction assessment to measure the satisfaction

Figure 1: Sharing Toolbox – Overview



Source: Own illustration.

level of each participating entity along various dimensions to identify future potential and opportunities for optimisation. As illustrated in figure 1, the tools are interrelated: a sharing project might be initiated by either a resource match (tool 1) or a partner match (tool 2), each one imperatively followed by the other. Only after both matches, of resources and partners, are confirmed, the actual sharing transaction can be planned (tool 3) while the evaluation of the sharing transaction (tool 4) provides feedback.

Tool #1 – Resource Matching

SMEs aim to identify the potential for B2B sharing transactions motivated by a temporary need for a resource or by excess capacity of a resource. In one case, an SME found that some of its forklifts were only used infrequently and decided to make this excess capacity available for sharing. The resource matching tool provides a systematic analysis of such resources (either with capacity available to share or a current need for additional

supply) based on the value chain (cf. Porter, 1985). SMEs are guided along their own value chain to identify resource needs and free capacities which can then be offered to, or requested from, potential sharing partners, e.g. by means of a platform. Based on a pool of published resource needs and supplies, the platform administers the matches between SMEs.

Tool #2 – Partner Matching

The research discovered that SMEs interested in B2B sharing strongly vary in their attitude and expectations toward a sharing partnership with others (cf. Perren & Kozinets, 2018). Two main dimensions can be distinguished: the depth of the relationship and the degree of third-party support to facilitate a sharing transaction. Four different variants of attitudes can thus be discerned (cf. figure 2): (1) the black board – a loose relationship with a low degree of third-party support (limited to publishing a resource); (2) the mediated platform that also provides for a loose relationship, however, with stronger third-party support along the execution of the sharing transaction; (3) the network group that aims for a more in-depth relationship between participating SMEs but requires little third-party support; (4) the mediated network that aims for both in-depth relationships and strong third-party support.

By means of 12 structured questions based on literature and industry practice, participating SMEs can determine their preferred relationship style for a specific sharing transaction. An SME's own profile may not directly determine a match with a sharing partner but should allow for clarifying its own expectations towards a sharing transaction. Expectations from sharing partners do not need to be identical, but should be compatible. Also, an SME may adopt different sharing attitudes in different transactions due to different resources to be shared or changing strategic and operational contexts. A typical example of a "black board" was

observed when measuring tools were exchanged informally between engineering companies on a “need to use” basis – the company in need of a tool just asked potential partners whether they had the tool available and could share it for the duration of their need.

Tool #3 – Transaction Planning

Once suitable partners and resources have been identified, the sharing parties must agree on the execution parameters of the sharing transaction. For doing so, the transaction planning tool offers a checklist to guide the negotiations between the two parties. This pragmatic tool addresses the most common issues to help avoid mistakes and allows both parties to identify any need for clarification before sharing a resource. It includes aspects such as technical data of the shared resource, insurance, transportation cost and payment conditions.

Tool #4 – Transaction Assessment

Following a successful sharing transaction, both parties should evaluate their experience against their original expectations. For doing so, the transaction evaluation tool provides a structured questionnaire along the categories (a) business value, (b) relationship to sharing partner, (c) process management and (d) personal/additional value. For each category, expectations and experiences are compared, based loosely on the Servqual logic (cf. Bruhn, 2019). Both partners of the B2B sharing transaction complete the survey independently to assess their satisfaction level and to determine individually how to proceed in the sharing partnership and whether to repeat the sharing transaction of the same resource with the same partner. While some cases were inherently built on repeat sharing, others confirmed the sharing value only for one transaction through this assessment tool.

Main Propositions

- 1 B2B sharing offers a wide range of benefits but is still rarely observed in industry practice.
- 2 Particularly SMEs can benefit from sharing since it provides them with access to resources they could not afford to own.
- 3 Four steps enable B2B sharing: (1) identifying resources, (2) matching partners, (3) preparing transactions, (4) evaluating outcomes.
- 4 Despite its obvious benefits, the shift from owning to sharing requires an effort at both the giving and the receiving company.

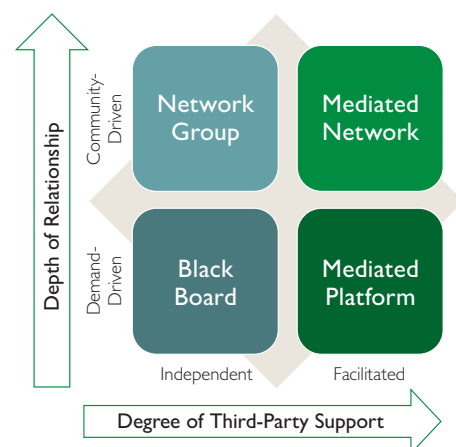
Recommendations to SME Industry Practice

The shift from ownership to sharing requires an effort at both the giving and the receiving company. B2B sharing in itself, however, offers opportunities for reducing cost, improving utilization of assets and contributing to sustainability targets. Besides, it creates new interactions and novel partnerships between companies in the preparation and

execution of sharing transactions. The transition from resource ownership to sharing requires a structured approach and active management involvement. In support of SMEs interested in embarking on a sharing endeavour, there is now a set of pragmatic tools and solutions at hand.

Using Swiss SMEs from asset-intensive industries as example cases, an overarching process and a set of four pragmatic tools were developed. The process underlines

Figure 2: Typology of Sharing Partnerships



Source: Own illustration.

Lessons Learned

Sharing offers a wide range of potential benefits, especially in asset-intensive industries and for SMEs. A structured approach and dedicated management effort is required to make B2B sharing successful. Between two sharing parties, not only resource needs and offers need to match, but also the desired type of sharing relationship. Applying four dedicated tools along a tested process enables SMEs to make the most of B2B sharing.

the need for a structured approach for SMEs to transition from ownership to sharing, which requires both the identification of resources suitable for sharing as well as finding a matching partner with a compatible attitude towards B2B sharing. Only in those cases, and by using a checklist and an evaluation form, can such sharing transactions be successfully implemented and executed. The frequency, degree of third-party support and success factors seem to vary strongly, depending on the resource that is shared and the participating parties' attitudes. This broad range of sharing transactions provides an opportunity for creativity and innovation while at the same time increasing the need for alignment between sharing partners ahead of a transaction.

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