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# Marketing Implementation in Small and Midsized Industrial Firms

## An Exploratory Study

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*Forty managers from small and midsized industrial firms describe their experiences with implementing marketing strategies. The process appears to involve an almost certain deviation from original plans and requires a continual stream of adaptive decisions and actions. Managers also describe the specific actions they take, and the tactics they use to gain cooperation from others in order to implement plans and accomplish market objectives.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Whereas developing market plans on paper can be a difficult undertaking, implementation and the actual accomplishment of intended objectives is often a greater challenge. The marketing literature is rich in insights about what ought to be the content of strategies [19], but has few guidelines for the process of deployment. Although other management disciplines present a rich body of empirical evidence [1, 10, 20, 28], barring a few exceptions, the marketing literature is largely silent on how implementation processes unfold in a variety of settings [5]. The lack of empirical data on implementation processes coupled with the increasing attribution of marketing's strategic failures to ineffec-

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# Plans are based on ideal scenarios— implementation is a confrontation with reality.

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tual implementation prompts an inquiry into the process [36].

In this article, we report some key findings from an exploratory study of the functional marketing implementation process in small and mid-sized industrial (SMI) firms. We focus on *functional* level marketing implementation, which is concerned with deploying the marketing mix and on SMI firms that represent a growing sector of the American economy. Smaller industrial firms created the bulk of America's industrial employment in the last decade and currently account for about half of all industrial value-added production and its exports [21, 22, 23]. Despite their increasing importance as the nation's job creators and contributors to industrial competitiveness, little academic attention has been directed toward understanding how they perform this critical marketing and revenue-generating function. Our central purpose is to provide a description of managerial involvement in the process in this setting, raise questions for future research, and discuss implications for improving marketing implementation practice. We describe the variety of ways in which managers experience implementation, take actions, and gain the cooperation from others in the organizations to deploy marketing plans and accomplish objectives.

We initially discuss relevant literature and describe how we identified the focal elements of the study. Then we describe our method of data collection and analysis and discuss our findings. Finally, we discuss the implications of the study that may interest scholars and managers involved in implementing marketing plans in smaller, entrepreneurial organizations.

## LITERATURE

Although some marketing literature devoted to implementation is evident [5, 15, 31, 39], the bulk of empirical research originates from other disciplines such as organization strategy [10], technological innovation [20], public

administration [34], managerial information systems [35], education [4], and information technology [7]. As almost all academic disciplines concerned with planning show some if not an equal interest in implementation-related issues, an exhaustive review is beyond the scope of this article. Here, we identify the multiple definitions and trends in the implementation literature and discuss the implications for our study.

The general view emerging from our review suggests that implementation involves *translating* strategic intentions into action steps, *assigning* relevant tasks and actions to people, ensuring that the tasks are *executed* as intended, and *accomplishing* predetermined objectives. Although there is general agreement on this view of implementation, the literature provides two fundamentally different views on how it is accomplished. In the instances where plans, strategies, technologies, or programs are markedly new to the firm, implementation appears to involve organizational design reconfiguration—i.e., a redesign of structure, systems, process, people, and rewards [10]. In other instances, implementation is viewed as an action-oriented process that requires administration and control [11]. Although the literature is diverse, at least four major trends in implementation research can be identified. First, nonacquiescent organizational members that resist implementation have concerned several scholars [3, 34]. Second, emerging from the concern with gaining the cooperation of organizational members for implementation, there has been considerable interest in the tactics managers use to gain such compliance [28]. Third, matching managers' background and char-

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# "I am a fireman. I put fires out," participating manager.

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acteristics with strategy being implemented is a well developed area of inquiry [12, 18]. The fourth, and the largest body of research, relates to the empirical assessment of relationships between strategy and organizational concepts and implementation outcomes [11, 13, 20]. There also is a distinct body of implementation-related writing that addresses practitioner concerns [16, 38].

The literature originating largely from nonmarketing and small business unit (SBU) and corporate-level strategy contexts says little about functional marketing implementation in SMI firms and even less about how the process is viewed by the managers directly involved in the process. The current stage of empirical development in the literature coupled with our interest in smaller industrial organizations suggests that theory-derived proposition testing approaches in this context would be premature, and a pilot that could identify and develop research questions from the perspective of managers directly involved in the process could help define a larger study.

## METHOD

We initially conducted a pilot study involving semistructured, depth interviews with 10 managers from SMI firms who were most responsible for their business unit's marketing implementation (one manager per firm). Based on our literature review, we explored the following topics in the in-depth interviews with managers:

- The market planning process and the nature of their involvement.
- The actions they took in order to implement their market plans and achieve objectives.
- The people and groups they interacted with for marketing implementation and the nature of their relationships and interactions.
- The outcomes of implementation.

The pilot study helped identify issues uniquely relevant to functional marketing implementation in SMI firms from the perspectives of managers directly involved in the pro-

cess and substantially narrowed the scope of our exploratory study. Additionally, we found that a relatively small number of people in each SMI firm was devoted to marketing, and one person chiefly responsible for implementation could provide comprehensive insights into the entire process. Hence, our main study focused on a few issues implicated by the pilot and included one manager per firm. An interview protocol was developed based on the findings of the pilot and the recommendations of a panel of experts with over two decades of experience in management consulting and research. This paper reports our findings related to managerial responses to the following questions in our main study:<sup>1</sup>

- In the context of your most recently ended planning period, and in relation to your most important product or product line:
- How would you describe your actual experiences with implementing your marketing plans and strategies? In what way were you personally involved? What would be an ideal implementation?
- As you reflect on what you did (for marketing implementation), where did you put most of your ideas and energies? What required the most attention? Why?
- Which were the most important groups you interacted with when you implemented your strategy? How did you manage to get them to support your efforts?

In the main study, we interviewed 40 managers directly responsible for implementing their business unit's marketing strategies from SMI firms (one manager per firm). We identified SMI firms (sales less than \$350 million) from the *Dun's Review of Business* in two contiguous SMSAs in northeastern United States. Managers were contacted by phone, prequalified as the persons *most* responsible for their business unit's marketing implementation, and asked to participate in the study. We contacted all SMI firms with more than 40 employees located in the two SMSAs and classified

<sup>1</sup> Other questions implicated by the pilot were also included in the main study. We limit our discussion to managerial responses to these questions, because they provide a comprehensive view of their involvement in the functional level process and allow us to stay within the space limitations.

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# Integration of diverse organizational agendas is critical for implementation.

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as groups 35 and 36 by the U.S. Government's Standard Industrial Classification codes ( $n = 118$ ). Ten were included in a pilot, and 40 participated in the main study, yielding a response rate of approximately 42%. Participating firms represented manufacturers of industrial and commercial machinery, electric, electronic, and computer equipment. All the sampled firms occupied regional and/or technological market niches and sold the products to industrial buyers. Of the 40 firms in the main study, 28 firms (70%) had sales less than \$20 million (highest sales: \$300 million, lowest sale: \$4 million).

Although we predetermined the questions and their order, several additional probes seeking clarifications and additional information and explanations were asked of all managers and in conjunction with all questions. Data collection was stopped after 40 completed interviews, because the concurrent process of transcribing and analysis showed signs of data saturation. New data appeared to reinforce existing findings without adding to their breadth. The content analysis was conducted mostly according to the guidelines provided by qualitative research scholars [6, 24, 29]. The transcripts were coded to enable classification of like data and enable comparison of 40 managers' responses to each question. Themes and patterns in the data were identified, and each was developed with actual managerial quotes that portrayed the substance of their responses.

In order to reduce the problems associated with internal validity, an additional researcher was hired to conduct an independent content analysis. Other than the identities of respondents and their firms, all other information related to data collection was made available to the analyst. Five meetings, lasting an average of 3 hours were held with the analyst, and the independently derived findings were compared and contrasted.

## FINDINGS

### How Managers Experience Marketing Implementation

Although scholars have studied managers' experiences to understand their learning [27] and their career advance-

ment [23], a systematic analysis of managerial experiences with marketing implementation could not be identified in the literature. Additionally, our interest in managers' free elicitation on their implementation experiences stemmed from the pilot, which suggested that their actual views of the functional marketing implementation process in SMI firms did not mirror the literature's "organizational design" and "actions" view. In order to develop a grounded view of the process from their perspectives, therefore, we explored managers' experiences in depth.

What we found common in managers' responses, when asked specifically to describe their implementation experiences, was the notion that plans based on estimates, assumptions, and conjectural scenarios represented *ideal* intentions. Implementation was experienced as the plan's confrontation with the real world of customers and competitors and as an inevitable deviation from original intents. Managers' views on the differences between ideal and actual processes highlighted some of the major problems uniquely relevant to marketing implementation in SMI firms. First, maintaining relevance between changing market events and the marketing strategy content was cited as the fundamental implementation challenge. Managers noted that their assumptions about customers and competitors were often invalidated by the rapid, unpredictable market changes, and required day-to-day, incremental adaptations of *all* elements of the marketing strategy content including targeted customers, objectives, and the mix. Second, defining appropriate action steps for implementation was described as a challenge. The changing strategy content held few clear task implications, and managers were continually involved in redefining tasks and communicating them across the organizations. Third, enlisting the cooperation from other functional groups such as production and R&D was viewed as a key implementation issue, and gaining the support of market intermediaries (i.e., manufacturers' representatives, distributors) and maintaining their interest in promoting the firm's products as a recurrent implementation problem. Finally, the high degree of uncertainty resulting from continual changes in the strategy content and redefined action steps was described as a source of concern. Reaching key milestones took longer than ex-

# Planning and implementation success are inseparable.

pected, many actions led to anticipated consequences, and several market contingencies and events caught them off-guard. Considerable energies were spent firefighting and dealing with unforeseen market events as they arose. The functional marketing implementation process in nearly all instances was viewed as a challenging, rewarding, and frustrating experience of adapting plans, defining and redefining tasks, and integrating the skills and efforts of organizational members to satisfy customers on a *day-to-day* basis. Within this overall theme of "implementation as a deviation from plans," however, existed three common themes in managers' experiences (see Table 1).

Half the managers ( $n = 20$ ) described their experiences with implementation primarily as a process of *managing sales*. Their implementation experiences related to searching for potential customers, meeting with and bringing products to prospects, processing orders, and ensuring payment. Recounting their heavy dependence on manufacturers' representatives and dealers for creating demand and performing key distribution and promotion functions, these managers noted that marketing implementation was largely about gaining their cooperation in generating sales. In all 20 instances, implementation was viewed as a process of finding customers *after* new technologies were developed by R&D. A manager from an electronic components manufacturer describing his implementation experiences in terms of finding customers for their technology indicated:

There really isn't a market for it (the product) at this point. We're in the process of developing a market for this technology and creating product applications. . . . We have to actually start from ground zero.

Implementation was experienced as a process of *tasks and activities* by 11 managers in the study (27.5%). Managers described their involvement in identifying and prioritizing activities, deploying resources, and coordinating and directing actions of diverse organizational members when specifically asked about their implementation experiences. Dominant in their responses was the notion that the complex problem of implementation could be deconstructed into a series of simple steps to attain marketing objectives. Implementation was viewed as a "production process" with each task contributing in a linear fashion to goal accomplishment. Managers noted that intentions were translated into action steps and assigned to people, time lines were defined, controls added, and feedback systems established. In this manner, the uncertainty of implementation was reduced to the certainty of short-term, seemingly contributory action steps.

Nine managers (22.5%) experienced marketing implementation as a *planning intensive* process. They described environmental analysis and selection of action alternatives as integral to implementation, and were involved in developing several sales and marketing programs including customer presentations and distributor promotions. Their longer term perspectives and the view that marketing implementation deserved systematic planning, intervention, and control differentiated this group of nine managers from all others in the sample. Whereas others in the study also addressed planning issues, these managers described planning as *central* to implementation. Hence planning and implementation were viewed as a singular, *planning ↔ implementation* gestalt, that represented a coherent stream of organization thinking and actions focused on meeting customer needs.

## Managers' Implementation-Directed Energies

We explored the areas where managers directed most of their ideas and energies and the specific actions they took for marketing implementation, because both the pilot and the literature suggested that it would shed light on how organizational and marketing plans as well as the complex implementation issues were simplified at the operational

**TABLE 1**  
Managerial Experiences with Implementation

Marketing Implementation Is Experienced as:	Cited by	Proportion
Sales Management	20	50.0
Tasks and Activities	11	27.5
Planning	09	22.5
Total	40	100.0

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# Is strategic market planning the answer to problems with firefighting?

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interface with customers. The literature indicated that strategies became a tangible force when people within organizations took actions [38], and managers were cited as chiefly responsible for generating the actions necessary for implementation [28, 38]. The pilot study, reinforcing some views in the literature, also suggested that managerial actions may shape *functional* marketing implementation processes as much as organizational design and structure [2]. Consistent with the literature's view in other marketing contexts and with our pilot study, the main study indicated that implementation was highly action oriented. We found managers involved in three types of implementation directed actions: selling and obtaining business ( $n = 40$ , 100%), firefighting and stopgap activities ( $n = 20$ , 50%), and developing support programs for sales ( $n = 8$ , 20%).

All 40 managers in the study noted that *selling and obtaining business* took up considerable energies, although not everyone's involvement was equally intense. These actions involved interacting with customers and market intermediaries, making presentations, developing quotations, and negotiating with buyers. More than half of the organizations in the sample operated in local/regional geographic niches, and a bulk of their sales occurred within the state or in the immediately contiguous states. Hence, considerable time and energies were spent finding new agents and other market intermediaries to reach customers in new geographic areas.

Twenty managers (50%) described *stopgaps* and *firefighting* as the *principal* marketing implementation-related activity. All managers, in one way or another, mentioned their inordinate involvement in stopgap and reactive behaviors in response to other questions in the study, if not recounting it as their principal implementation activity. Stopgaps referred to unplanned actions used to address unexpected market contingencies and maintain coordination between functional groups. Stopgaps were also aimed at realigning implementation processes with plans and were applied when the internal and environmental events required immediate corrective actions to ensure goal accomplishment. One manager described his firefighting activities this way:

I am a fireman, I put fires out. I have to be reactive. Less and less of my time is being able to be spent on where I think it should be spent. . . . Firefighting, that's what we do. We are firemen.

Eight managers (20%) indicated that performing *supportive functions and developing programs* took up most of their implementation-directed energies. They were involved analyzing market conditions, overseeing market intelligence and research, and projecting future market scenarios. Considerable energies also were reportedly spent in new product development, planning and managing trade shows, media planning, and developing sales and promotional tools.

## Managers' Implementation Related Interactions with Other Functional Groups

The pilot study showed that the principal implementation-related responsibility of managers *inside* the firm was gaining the cooperation from other functional groups. A variety of academic disciplines also suggested that implementation required such organizationally integrated efforts [8, 9]. Moreover, the idea that marketing's success required multidisciplinary input and coordination was widely supported in the literature [36, 37]. Marketing's integration with other functional groups was found to positively impact organizational effectiveness [17], new product development [14], and implementation of marketing decisions as well as business strategies [32, 40]. Hence, the literature as well as the pilot presented a strong case for exploring managers' implementation-related interactions with other functional groups and their efforts to gain their cooperation.

Concurring with the literature, our main study showed that managers frequently interacted with nearly all functional groups including R&D, engineering, manufacturing, sales, and customer service to ensure smooth marketing implementation. Nearly all managers reported that customer requests for alternative materials, new product features and design modifications, accelerated delivery dates, and other accommodations required high degrees of coor-

dination among functional groups. Additionally, managers stated that integrating diverse organizational skills, interest, and agendas, attaining a meeting of minds, and generating a cohesive stream of customer-focused actions from multiple functional groups were critical determinants of marketing implementation effectiveness. We found managers using a variety of tactics to gain the cooperation of other groups (see Table 2).

Eleven managers (27.5%) stated that they gained cooperation from other functional groups by *persuasion*, and appeared involved in inducing, convincing, and influencing to gain support. The premise behind the persuasion was to get others to see the world *their* way. Managers' *sold* marketing's point of view to other functional groups in a manner similar to the way they would a customer. A manager describing his emphasis on persuading and selling within his firm noted:

I get everyone to buy into the plan . . . I do just as much selling inside these doors as I do outside.

The persuasion strategies differed with the situation and the people being influenced. Successful persuasion, these managers indicated, required a sense of timing, the right argument, and the right rhetoric so that others could put up limited resistance and "buy" into their point of view. A manager described this strategic approach to persuasion this way:

If you feel strongly about something, then you will make an issue of it and maybe even go down with the ship. Or you find different ways to approach it. You may have to wait a week and then you may have to try something else or you bring in some testimonials.

Eight managers (20%) elicited support from other functional groups for marketing's implementation efforts via negotiation. Although both influence strategies involved a power play, negotiation differed from persuasion because managers were more willing to compromise and not as in-

**TABLE 2**  
**Tactics Used to Gain Cooperation from Other Functional Groups**

Tactic	Cited by	Proportion
Integration via persuasion	11	27.5
Integration via team work	11	27.5
Integration via negotiation	08	20.0
Integration via commonality of goals	06	15.0
Integration via total quality management	02	05.0
Other	02	05.0
Total	40	100.0

tent on pushing or "selling" marketing's point of view. While negotiating, managers appeared willing to forego some items on their agenda in return for cooperation from other functional groups. Although negotiations did not maximize marketing's influence on others, nor lead to unanimous decisions, the eventual resolutions appeared acceptable to most parties. Thus, plans were implemented and goals reached, even if they were not the best conjectured from marketing's frame of reference. The mutual give-and-take and the accommodation of diverse ideas often involved all parties agreeing to a plan that did not represent anyone's complete agenda but collectively satisfied most.

Eleven managers (27.5%) elicited cooperation from other functional groups by defining marketing implementation as *teamwork*. These managers promoted the marketing implementation process as a joint effort that required coordination of diverse organizational skills. Key managers in other functional groups were encouraged to examine and gain an in-depth understanding of each others' vision and objectives and support the marketing implementation process:

The way I do it is, I have the whole management work as a team . . . I overcame a lot of provincialism and isolation and I reward them based on group performance . . . So it behooves them to know what each other is doing . . . I am convinced that the right way to go is to get everybody to really fully understand what the other guys do.

The teamwork appeared to reduce isolationist tendencies as shared thinking and actions were encouraged and responsibilities and rewards more openly shared. Teamwork also appeared to help members gain a better appreciation of the differences in objectives, skills, and constraints within the firm, and ensure that disagreements about implementation alternatives were addressed.

Six managers (15%) gained cooperation from other functional groups by emphasizing the *commonality of superordinate goals*. They elicited support from engineering, production, and other functional groups by emphasizing the need for finding the most efficient solution for customers. Rallying around the importance of customer and market goals also appeared to help prioritize work flows and resource allocation, in addition to the advantages of promoting interfunctional cohesion.

The adoption of total quality management (*TQM*) *programs* appeared to serve a useful integrative function for marketing implementation processes in two firms (5%). Two managers responsible for marketing implementation also were involved in total quality programs and indicated

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that it is the principal means of generating a unified, integrative organizational focus on customers and implementation. The managers were careful to point out that the TQM programs were not incorporated for the specific purpose of improving interdepartmental integration for marketing implementation, but that it was one of its more relevant and powerful *effects*.

Finally, two managers (5%) in the study were less involved in integrating other functional areas with the marketing's strategy implementation process, and more in fitting marketing's activities and goals with the production and engineering departments' goals and strategies. In these instances, interfunctional integration for marketing implementation occurred due to the inordinately high influence of production and/or engineering departments, which directed the participation and support from all other functional groups.

Managers favoring persuasion and negotiation as the principal approach to gaining cooperation from other functional groups differed substantially from others in terms of their guiding beliefs and decision styles. We summarize the major differences in Table 3.

The differences were noteworthy for several reasons. In terms of their effectiveness, managers noted that the interfunctional cooperation resulting from persuasion and negotiation was of a shorter duration and of a lower quality than that resulting from other approaches in garnering support. Persuasion and negotiations, the data suggested, appealed to lower order motives of immediate personal gain for functional group members, and failed to offer a compelling reason for long-term cooperation with marketing's implementation initiatives. Hence, managers relying on persuasion and negotiation were *continually involved* in overcoming resistance and renegotiating terms without eliciting a high degree of sustainable cooperation from other functional groups. By contrast, the data suggested that team work, commonality of objectives, and TQM as the basis for garnering support appealed to a notion of common achievement and benefits over the longer term and had a longer lasting impact. Additionally, persuasion and negotiation tactics were favored in low-tech firms operating in relatively stable environments, whereas the other methods were more prevalent in high-tech firms operating in volatile markets. For managers facing challenging environments, the importance of co-creative and collaborative approaches for effective marketing-led interfunctional integration was clearly indicated by our study.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Managers in SMI firms were challenged by marketing implementation because it represented an almost certain deviation from original intents. Day-to-day changes in customer preferences, competitive actions, and technological advances frustrated, to some degree, *all* marketing plans and intentions. Implementation required continual adjustment in the strategy content and redirection in organizational actions to address emerging market problems and opportunities. Much of the implementation was characterized by firefights aimed at solving emerging, unforeseen problems. The functional level process in SMI firms was anything but routine, and rarely unfolded predictably and faithfully from formal strategies committed to paper. It relied on managerial creativity and initiative and tested their skills and endurance. Here we highlight three major implications of the findings that may interest scholars, i.e., the nature of functional marketing implementation in SMI firms, the nature of interfunctional integration, and areas for future research.

First, although the terms "planning" and "marketing" were largely integrated into *manager speak* and generally held clear and distinctive meanings, the term "marketing implementation" evoked relatively unclear, diffuse gestalts. Instead of referring to a common frame of reference, implementation was experienced in widely different ways, i.e., as sales management, as tasks and activities, and as a process in planning. In no instance in our interviews was implementation experienced as a distinctive process with its own unique set of concepts, terminologies, or metaphors. Additionally, terms synonymous with implementation, such as "execution" and "actualization of goals," often used in the management literature, were rarely noticed in managers' responses. This finding raised questions about the true nature of *functional* marketing implementation in smaller industrial firms. Currently, the literature views corporate-level strategy implementation as a function of organizational actions, administrative mechanisms, and redesign [10, 11], and marketing implementation as a function of managerial skills and structure [6]. On the other hand, functional marketing implementation in SMI firms was viewed as the process of creating sales, performing tasks, and planning by the managers directly involved in the process. Ironically, planning was viewed as integral to implementation in several instances ( $n = 9, 22.5\%$ ). Instead of referring



**TABLE 3**  
**Comparison of Managers/Firms and Their Influence Styles**

Managers Who Favored Persuasion and Negotiation to Elicit Support from Other Functional Groups	Managers Who Favored Commonality of Objectives, TQM, and Teamwork to Elicit Support
<i>Managerial beliefs</i>	
“Everyone in the organization should see it my way.”	“Everyone in the organization wants to pursue different goals, but we also can think alike and contribute toward meeting customer needs.”
Internal (e.g., employees, other functional groups) and external (e.g., customers, market intermediaries) constituents will either not support marketing’s initiatives or not support it sufficiently	Some organizational goals transcend self-interests, and can be jointly pursued. It is possible to create mutually supportive relationships between marketing and other important internal and external constituents.
Marketing is a constant sum game; maximizing marketing’s influence and converting others to marketing’s way of thinking is important	Marketing and organizational success are closely linked; influence tactics should emphasize the common organizational goals over the gains of any one particular functional group or person; market intermediaries can be positively influenced to support the firm’s market initiatives, in a mutually beneficial relationship
<i>Organization/environment</i>	
Market environment is low-tech; competition is local and regional	Market environment is high-tech; competition is national and/or international
Organizational functional groups often have rigid, inflexible boundaries	Boundaries between organizational functional groups are flexible and fluid
<i>Decision-making</i>	
Managers reflect low levels of integrative understanding of others’ constraints and objectives in their decision-making	Managers reflect high degree of integrative understanding of others’ constraints and frames of reference in their day-to-day decision making
<i>Outcomes</i>	
Influence tactics are more likely to evoke lower order motivations (support marketing’s efforts for immediate personal gains)	Influence styles more likely to evoke higher order motivations (i.e., support marketing implementation for longer term common organizational gains)
Inordinate amounts of managerial energies are spent in integrating functional groups to support marketing implementation	Relatively less energies are devoted to interfunctional coordination, and more energies are focused on customers and markets

to a subset of activities that managers performed, implementation appeared to relate to just about everything they did at functional levels. A better understanding of how smaller industrial organizations conduct their functional level marketing activities is likely to emerge as academia begins to understand more about the close relationship between planning and implementation. Future research that views the “planning ↔ implementation” as an inclusive gestalt, and focuses on their interaction, is more likely to generate relevant insights for managers in smaller, entrepreneurial firms. Separating the research on functional market planning and implementation, on the other hand, is less likely to explain the true nature of this complex process.

Academia has long since established that interfunctional integration is critical for a variety of marketing processes, and the responses of nearly all managers in the sampled firms reinforced the literature’s view. Our findings clearly suggest that it is time to move beyond the concern with *whether or not* interfunctional integration can improve marketing implementation effectiveness, and show greater con-

cern for questions like: (1) how is interfunctional integration accomplished in a variety of marketing settings and in a variety of organizations, and (2) which tactics for gaining cooperation from other functional groups are more effective than others, and how do these relationships change with market and organizational contingencies. Although similar work has been done in the context of organizational strategies [28], research aimed at investigating these questions in the marketing context may provide useful information to managers operating at functional levels and struggling with this issue on a day-to-day basis.

Our findings also suggested that small and midsized industrial firms deserve their own academic research focus. We found that managers in SMI firms encountered a meaningfully different set of market contingencies and faced a different set of internal constraints than those in larger organizations. We also found that the traditional boundaries among corporate, business unit level, and functional marketing strategies reported in the context of larger firms [41] blurred and, in most instances, disappeared altogether.

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Functional marketing implementation in SMI firms involved lower degrees of formal planning, and inordinate amounts of maneuvering, firefighting, accommodating, and hustling both within and outside the firm. Our data-based view that functional marketing implementation results from the creativity and initiative of managers acting closest to customers is markedly different from the “structure-systems-process” view based on larger firms and corporate level strategy implementation [1, 10]. Rather than telling the growing number of managers in SMI firms what occurs in and apparently works for larger organizations, it is time to research smaller organizations and create useful information that can help alleviate their marketing and implementation problems.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

### Adopting Strategic Thinking

All managers in our study appeared action oriented, and many were consumed by short-term tactical actions or firefights. Although this *bias for action* is cited as a critical determinant of corporate success [30], we found it highly dysfunctional for marketing implementation in its firefighting form. Firefights, the participating managers noted, drained their energies and other organizational resources, and often failed to make a lasting impact on implementation effectiveness.

The incidence of firefighting was high in the SMI firms because managers frequently encountered unexpected contingencies that required immediate and often unplanned responses. Additionally, when marketing actions did not produce intended results such as customer orders, dealer support, interfunctional cooperation, managers rushed to take corrective action. Hence, firefights aimed to prevent imminent problems or failures, or ensure goal accomplishment, or both. Overwhelmed by the high incidence of firefights, managers were less able to devote time to long-term thinking and had a limited perspective on the future. The resulting stress also appeared to negatively effect their ability to concentrate and focus on larger organizational goals.

These findings raise two major questions: (1) does the high incidence of firefights signal a failure of planning, and (2) should smaller industrial organizations adopt formal strategic market planning to reduce the firefights associated with functional marketing implementation? Our exploratory data, on the other hand, provides contrary evidence.

Whereas such formal strategic market planning exercises may force managers into thinking about market contingencies and presumably reduce the incidence of firefighting, the data suggest two major problems with this idea. First, *implementing* formal strategic market planning and gaining its acceptance within SMI firms is likely to present a fresh challenge to managers already strapped for time. Second, the day-to-day shifts in competitive activities and customer preferences that impact *functional* level marketing are likely to challenge all but the most insightful and well researched plans. Whether strategic marketing planning by itself can guide day-to-day decision-making and actions at functional levels, and whether managers operating at lower levels in organizational hierarchies can implement such processes, is currently unknown. In the absence of such information, suggestions favoring the adoption of strategic market planning in SMI firms specifically for the purpose of reducing the incidence of firefights are ineffectual and platitudinal.

To practitioners, our data suggest that high degrees of firefights signals not a failure of planning as much as it does the absence of *strategic thinking*. We found managers demonstrating high degrees of strategic thinking were involved considerably less in firefights and crises management. Strategic thinkers appeared no different from others in terms of the formal strategic market planning they conducted, but significantly different in the way they thought, made decisions, and managed relationships with others. Strategic thinkers were closely *connected* with key internal (i.e., their team members, members of other functional groups) and external constituents (i.e., customers and market intermediaries). Their carefully cultivated personal relationships with key constituents in their environment promoted awareness of (1) their multiple skills, capabilities, and often conflicting points of view, (2) the multiple ways in which they interpreted environmental events, and (3) the different action alternatives they considered and viewed as appropriate from their perspectives. Strategic thinkers also identified multiple action alternatives and evaluated them on the basis of (1) who and to what extent would support and act on their decisions, and (2) the expected consequences and competitive reactions to their decisions. Concurring with Mintzberg's [25, 26] vigorous arguments for strategic thinking, we found strategic thinkers able to generate high degrees of support and cooperation from internal and external constituents for their day-to-day marketing decisions. In sum, to managers operating at functional levels in smaller organizations, our findings suggest

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that whereas strategic market planning may alleviate several problems, developing strategic thinking skills is likely to reduce the incidence of firefights and stopgap activities that adversely impact their marketing effectiveness.

### Marketing Implementation and Information Technology

A major difference between reactive and responsive implementation processes was the availability of timely and accurate information to guide day-to-day marketing decision-making. Even the more market responsive implementors, however, relied overwhelmingly on informal processes and personal contacts with key constituents for staying informed. Although the advantages of such informal information gathering processes were clear in our data, whether they can sustain complex marketing decisions in growing firms over the long-term, and aid multiple decision-makers, is questionable.

Managers in SMI firms may find it useful to incorporate tailor-made information systems that can help identify the environmental contingencies to monitor (i.e., identify *what* to monitor) and assist in their day-to-day scanning process (i.e., explain *how* to monitor and actually conduct the scanning), to make their implementation processes market responsive. The explosion in new information technologies coupled with rapidly decreasing costs of computerization and networking hold significant promise for SMI firms that require flexible, tailor-made systems, want to connect better with key functional groups and market constituents, and improve implementation effectiveness.

### CONCLUSION

Implementation appears to challenge almost all managers responsible for accomplishing market objectives in an uncertain, turbulent environment. Managers describe the process as simultaneously frustrating, challenging, and rewarding. Functional marketing implementation represents a day-to-day involvement in meeting with customers, creating sales, firefighting, meeting with other organizational members and integrating their skills and energies to meet market goals. Managers use a variety of tactics to gain the cooperation of other functional groups, and some appear to have a longer lasting impact than others.

Our findings raise several questions about the relationship between planning and implementation, the high incidence of firefighting, and the role of strategic market plan-

ning and information systems that may interest both scholars and practitioners. Future research on the planning-implementation interface and on the synergies that result from the interactions between planners and implementors appears necessary. A separate research focus on smaller, entrepreneurial firms may also help alleviate some of the marketing problems that a significant proportion of all American businesses face. At this juncture, a large number of investigations of the marketing strategy implementation process in a variety of settings is necessary before a critical mass of knowledge emerges to aid theory development.

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