Marketing Implementation in Smaller Organizations: Definition, Framework, and Propositional Inventory

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The process by which managers implement marketing plans in smaller industrial organizations has yet to be conceptualized in ways that can spur theoretical development or speak to the practical realities of managers from this growing, important segment of American industry. This article, based on an exploratory study of marketing strategy processes in 50 smaller, entrepreneurial organizations develops a framework to stimulate thinking and an inventory of propositions for future testing. The study finds market planning and implementation inextricably linked. Marketing implementation emerges as an organization's adaptive response to day-to-day market events that is rarely scripted by plans and as a process that involves purposeful actions and improvisations as much as stopgap actions and firefights. The nature and extent of implementation-related improvisations appear to directly affect a firm's market orientation, rate of growth, and strategic effectiveness.

Marketing implementation, the process of translating strategic intent into actions and accomplishing objectives, appears to concern practitioners at least as much as strategic planning (Hrebiniak 1990). The outcomes of marketing implementation including sales and revenues determine not only the ultimate worth of marketing strategies but, owing to its revenue-generating function, the ultimate viability of businesses as well (see Bonoma 1985). While there is a rich research tradition in the strategy content area, process research remains relatively underdeveloped in marketing (see Franwick, Ward, Hutt, and Reingen 1994; Hutt, Reingen, and Ronchetto 1988 for notable exceptions). Although some academic thinking on the subject is evident (Cespedes 1991; Walker and Ruekert 1987), and important pioneering research has been conducted (see Bonoma 1985), significant theory development is yet to occur.

The purpose of this article is to report findings from our exploratory study of marketing implementation processes in 50 small and midsize industrial (SMI) firms. We focus on SMI firms because they represent a risk-taking, innovative segment of the economy that accounts for about half of all industrial employment, half of America's industrial value-added production, and half of all exports (Light 1993; Port, Carey, Kelley, and Anderson-Forest 1992). Despite their importance in the American industrial landscape as job- and value-creating engines, few, if any, frameworks exist to explain how their marketing agendas are translated into actions and results achieved.

Our findings, based on in-depth interviews with managers most responsible for their business unit's marketing implementation processes, show that (a) day-to-day improvisations and adaptations in strategy content and in the organization of marketing activities are central defining features of the implementation process; (b) the nature and extent of improvisations and adaptations ultimately

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determine the firm's market orientation, its rate of growth, and its strategic effectiveness; and (c) planning and implementation processes interact strongly, and their interaction—more than the intrinsic quality of either—shapes market behaviors of the firm and affect strategic outcomes.

We describe our findings and structure our arguments in the following way. We initially discuss relevant literature and describe our method. Then, based on descriptions of managers' involvement in the marketing implementation process, we identify its distinctive features and develop a working definition. In addition, we determine the key forces that shape the firm's adaptive behaviors in the market and configure them into a "box and arrows" framework that describes how the process unfolds in practice. We also develop a propositional inventory that represents our attempt to translate some of the tacit, utilitarian, cognitively immediate, and undetachable knowledge that managers develop from their experiences into propositional, epistemic knowledge to aid future theory development. The propositional inventory also reflects our attempt to translate the practical, situationally bound, subjective reasoning based on limited, often immediately available information that guides managers' behaviors (i.e., *X* should be done when *Y* occurs in *Z* situations) to theoretical reasoning about "what occurs" (see Deligonul 1998). We justify our propositions with descriptions from the data, relevant quotes from managers, and with literature that has spoken to the issues that emerge from our study.

We emphasize descriptions because participating managers rarely segment their thinking and descriptions into neat conceptual boxes that lend themselves to linear, step-by-step analysis of implementation from start to finish. We find their implementation-related schemata inseparable from those associated with other aspects of their professional lives, including planning, listening, managing and empowering people, and building relationships with market constituents. Our descriptions therefore serve to contextualize the framework and propositions we draw from their verbal protocols.

Our study responds to the call for new thinking about strategy processes and draws inspiration from Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) and Bedeian (1990), whose writings have called for innovative ways of understanding strategic behaviors of firms. Our exploratory approach is inspired by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Kohli and Jaworski (1990), and is based on the "theory in use" approach (Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring 1982).

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The Literature

While some interest in marketing implementation-related issues is apparent after Bonoma's (1985) pioneering study, the bulk of implementation research has occurred in other disciplines such as information technology (e.g., Cooper and Zmud 1990), organizational strategy (e.g., Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986), public policy (e.g., Pressman and Wildavsky 1979), and technology innovations (e.g., Leonard-Barton 1988). Implementation issues have been addressed at the product strategy (e.g., Bart 1986), business unit (e.g., Govindarajan 1988; Gupta 1987), and corporate strategy levels (e.g., Ansoff 1984). The literature is clustered around (a) the concern for influencing and integrating the energies of a diverse body of people involved with the implementation process (e.g., Pressman and Wildavsky 1979); (b) matching managerial characteristics with the strategy being implemented (e.g., Kerr and Jackofsky 1989); (c) tactics used by managers to influence participants (e.g., Nutt 1989); (d) the association between organization, strategy, and implementation (e.g., Miller, Droge, and Toulouse 1988); and (e) practical insights in the how-to genre (see Hrebiniak 1990).

Strategy implementation processes are conceptualized in one of two ways: (a) implementation as organizational change and (b) implementation as operational-level actions. For instance, implementation as a process involving substantive, discontinuous change and conceptualized as a function of organizational design (i.e., structure-system-process-rewards-people reconfiguration) refers to situations in which formal planning has occurred with an intent to bring about a new internal order and a new relationship with the environment (e.g., Ansoff 1984; Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986; Hrebiniak and Joyce 1984). Corporate-level strategies representing significant shifts in the organization's strategy appear to entail substantive organizational design changes for implementation. This view is strongly aligned with the notion that strategies are the key contingencies for organizational design (see Hoskisson 1987). On the other hand, implementation as "actions" and a process of managing a strategy installed earlier to achieve current objectives particularly at the strategic business unit (SBU) level is a wholly different view. This stream of thinking refers to implementation situations that may not entail substantive changes in the strategy or significant reconfiguration in the organization. Instead, the emphasis is on actions and on controlling the process of deployment with administrative mechanisms (e.g., Govindarajan 1988).

The ontology of implementation research, particularly in the context of corporate and SBU-level organizational strategies appears fairly well established, that is, structure, system, and process-related concepts. However, this does not preclude a separate research focus on marketing implementation, because of its unique concern with deploying the marketing mix and developing long-term relationships with customers (including market intermediaries). Moreover, in the context of SMI firms, basic information on what the process entails, whom it involves, and what its influencing factors and relevant outcomes are is difficult to extract from the literature. The implications for the present study, given the current stage of empirical development and the research objectives, are the following: (a) use of an inductive approach, with an emphasis on generating internally consistent findings based on a purposeful sample of knowledgeable managers, is more appropriate than a theory-derived hypothesis testing, random sample–based study aiming to generate widely generalizable findings; and (b) a pilot study of managers from SMI firms, directly involved in the implementation process that identifies relevant human and organizational issues for further investigation, can represent a sound initiating step toward defining a larger study.

The Pilot and the Main Study

Ten managers, prequalified as the most knowledgeable of their business unit's marketing implementation, from 10 SMI firms, were initially interviewed in-depth. A list of topics that served as the a priori conceptualization for the pilot study was generated from the literature (e.g., Hirschman 1986) and included the following:

- The nature of the firm's marketing plans and the manager's involvement in the market-planning process.
- The actions managers take to implement market plans.
- Managers' relationships with other people and groups who influence the implementation process.
- The outcomes of implementation.

Although the list of topics served as a discussion guide, the interviews were highly formative; that is, they were shaped by the probes and clarifications that managerial responses prompted. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, and were tape-recorded and transcribed. The findings were content analyzed and an interview protocol was developed for the second stage of interviews (see Appendix A for interview protocol). The pilot helped define the larger study, set limits to its scope, and ensured a feasible research design (i.e., one manager per firm was interviewed, some smaller industrial firms were included, and important issues identified from the pilot were explored in-depth).

Forty managers were interviewed during the main study (1 manager per SMI firm, 77.5% with less than 150 employees). All were prequalified as the most knowledgeable about, and the most responsible for, their business unit's marketing implementation. They were asked to respond in the context of their most important product or product line, and the most recently ended planning period (see Table 1 for a brief description). Forty tape-recorded interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes yielded more than 1,200 pages of transcripts. Data collection was stopped after 40 completed interviews, and no further attempt was made to sample additional firms after several clear indicators of data saturation began to emerge. The concurrent analysis of transcripts showed that new data almost entirely reinforced existing themes and patterns, without adding substantially to the breadth of the findings (see Appendix B for description of data analysis).

FINDINGS

Defining the Marketing Implementation Construct

Our challenge of developing a comprehensive definition of the dynamic, action-oriented marketing implementation construct relates to the process of translating the tacit knowledge that managers possess. This knowledge rarely originates from deliberate, conscious reflection about managers' implementation-related experiences or from their search for true definitions based on other concepts but results instead from our questions that urge reflection before responding. When asked to describe their involvement in implementation, their experiences translate at once as a wordless cognition- and affect-rich flash of insights (see Deligonul 1998). Hence, our definition relies greatly on the way managers appear to structure their thinking and describe their involvement in marketing implementation processes. For instance, focal in their responses are, for example, the low incidence of formal market planning, the emergent properties of implementation, the high degree of improvisations and adaptations that occur in plans and the organization, and the breadth of outcomes ascribed to the marketing function. Also focal are issues related to organizational change, market uncertainty, and fluidity in the pattern of resource deployment. We configure these focal elements to define functional marketing implementation processes in SMI firms as follows:

> A process of organizational improvisation and adaptation resulting from the interaction between emerging environmental forces (including day-to-day market events) and emerging managerial choices (including day-to-day improvisations and adaptations in the strategy content and task environment) directed toward achieving market and organizational objectives.

Consider that only 7 of the 40 firms (17.5%) conduct formal market planning. More than half document formal sales goals (n = 25, 62.5%) but do little else in the way of formal planning. No formal or informal market plans are committed to paper in 8 firms (20%). Even when little is committed to paper, however, we find that managers can verbally articulate the sales objectives in dollars. In other words, there is a clear internalized, if not explicitly docu-

TABLE 1
Description of the Sample

Type of Firm	*Number*	*Percentage*
Computer and electronic equipment	16	40.0
Industrial machines (e.g., pumps, imaging machines)	11	27.5
Precision tool and dye manufacturers	7	17.5
Cable television equipment	3	7.5
Other	3	7.5

Job Titles of Participating Managers	*Number*
Vice President Sales and Marketing	10
Sales Manager	7
Marketing Manager	6
Owner (chief stockholder)	5
Vice President, and General Manager	4
Director, Sales and Marketing	3
Director, Marketing	2
President	1
General Manager	1
Manager, Administrative Services	1

mented, notion of the sales objectives and time lines even in the instances where formal market planning does not occur. Regardless of the extent of formal planning, the bulk of the marketing strategy content that is implemented is emergent versus deliberate and determined in real time, that is, during implementation (see Mintzberg and Waters 1985).

We term *managerial behaviors* as "improvisations" because the time gap between when they plan and when they take action converges dramatically, and "adaptations" because their real-time decisions to redeploy their energies and resources also appear to influence systemic changes in the design of marketing activities and shape the firm's behaviors in the marketplace during the longer term (for further differentiation between the two constructs, see Moorman and Miner 1998). For instance, although the current pattern of resource deployment choices and the strategy content function to both guide and constrain managers, new customers are sought, new promises are made to customers, product designs are modified, prices are altered, distribution arrangements are fine-tuned, and promotional monies are redeployed on a day-to-day basis to attain the more firmly held sales and revenue objectives. Similarly, because task implications change with the emerging strategy content, the implementation task environment is emergent as well. Although managers are both guided and constrained by the current organization of marketing activities, they continually improvise and redeploy available talents and energies (both their own and their team's) in response to the emerging strategy content. A manager notes,

> You have a certain reputation (in the market) and you improvise. We'll observe, improve, produce, measure, and that is sort of the way. It's like a circle. I observe things, I try to improve things. That means (you initially) produce (the widget), then you measure (the response from the market) and then when you measure then you get data and then you plan. . . . Then you bounce back say from planning to producing, from planning to improving, improving sales, improving production.

Market planning and implementation emerge as highly interactive processes. Each appears to affect and shape the other in a continual, multidirectional "planning↔implementation" dynamic. What occurs in terms of the firm's relationship with market constituents during the year, therefore, is poorly explained by a predefined strategy content (whether formally documented or indicated by the current pattern of resource deployment) and worse yet by the situation analysis that functioned as a basis for planning. It is the interaction, more than the intrinsic quality of the plan, or the implementation-directed action that shapes the firm's market behavior. The post-priori descriptions reflect a high degree of fluidity in plans and patterns of resource deployment across implementation actions. A manager addressing the issues of responsiveness between planning and implementation notes,

> Maybe it's hard for me to separate the two (planning and implementation functions) because I move quickly back and forth between them. When you're in the implementing mode, I think you have to know how to come back to the plan and change the plan. If all of a sudden in the practical world of implementation the plan just ain't [*sic*] working anymore, it is one thing to be persistent, and I consider myself a very persistent person. It's crazy to be persistent if the world has changed.

The distinction between planners and implementers also blurs in the sampled firms. Planners and implementers are either the same people (n = 15, 37.5%) or report a high degree of interaction when they are separate individuals (n = 11, 27.5%). The complex interdependencies between the two processes preclude the deconstruction of market planning and implementation into conceptually separate, dissected domains for independent analysis and, when so done, fail to adequately explain the former or the latter. Instead, the interactions between planners and implementers, and the responsiveness of the plan to the implementation and vice versa, appear to explain much of what occurs.

These findings raise two related questions about marketing processes of SMI firms. First, is the entire content of the strategy emergent, or is there a deliberate strategy present in all? If it is present, what, if any, role does it play in implementation? Second, is all that is deliberate and stable in the strategy content during implementation strategic; and is all that is emergent, improvised, and adapted during implementation tactical? If so, is marketing implementation in SMI firms mostly tactical and not strategic? These questions are related since some current conceptualizations view deliberate strategies as results of formal analysis and emergent strategies as intuitive, subjective, and seemingly tactical improvisations (see Campbell 1991). These questions become particularly meaningful since findings emerge from managerial descriptions of their day-to-day implementation experiences in which tactics (i.e., decisions/actions aimed at gaining advantage in the short term via deployment of immediately available resources such as managers' time and energies) can become focal. We focus the following discussion on these questions.

First, despite the low incidence of formal planning, the strategy content managers inherit at the beginning of the planning period is easy to identify. The deliberate strategy content exists; that is, a consistency in the firm's product/market choices and in the general pattern of resource deployment exists from year to year, whether or not intended or formally documented. In other words, there is considerable continuity in the pattern of resources deployed to material, plant, equipment, technology, and people, and in the type of customer pursued. Although anchored strongly to the deliberate strategy, the improvisations can considerably change the nature of strategy content that is eventually implemented. A manager notes,

> By the time your implementation comes around, which is the first of the year, all your thinking that went into this plan is probably nearly six months old. But from a practical sense, nothing has changed so much that you would like to change the (entire) plan. . . . . In aggregate you may be accomplishing the same thing. But if you dissect the plan (after implementation) and go back to when it was put together, by the time it's executed, all the pieces may be almost totally different.

Second, questions about the strategy-tactics differentiation in the marketing implementation context arise because cursory analysis suggests that most improvisations that managers describe are tactical and not strategic. Moreover, few adaptations represent significant departures from the firm's relationship with the environment. It is easy, therefore, to draw simplistic notions about "deliberate-stable-strategy, emergent-improvised-tactic"–type linkages, particularly when the descriptions seemingly relate to day-to-day improvisations. Several factors, however, preclude the drawing of such conclusions. The conceptual boundaries that differentiate strategies from tactics are less than clear. While strategy refers to "the important things" and tactics to details, Ansoff (1965) notes, "In retrospect, details prove strategic." Similarly, Rumelt (1974) notes that the decision to label a particular set of action choices strategic or tactical lie within the subjective eyes of the beholder. Reinforcing these views, a manager in the study notes,

> I think one man's tactic may be another man's strategy depending on the organization of the company. Working from the bottom up, a man who is operating a machine, making something in machinery, he may have, what he would call a strategy to solve a particular problem in that machine, but to the manager of the factory that strategy may only be a tactic.

Implementation-related improvisations and adaptations emerge as a complex mix of (a) strategic changes, that is, a stream of deliberate resource allocation choices that in aggregate can lead to new or significantly altered relationships in the marketplace; (b) tactical changes, that is, a stream of resource allocation choices (often intuitive) aimed at the short term; and (c) firefights and stopgap decisions and/or actions, that is, knee-jerk responsiveness to internal and external contingencies that could have been foreseen, prevented, or planned for—but those that require an immediate, often unmindful response.

Finally, even though all managers are concerned with sales, revenues, and profits, 17.5 percent cite organizational growth and 23.5 percent cite psychosocial outcomes (including the creation of a satisfying work environment, providing job security, and accelerating learning) as the most valued outcomes of marketing implementation. The day-to-day sales and revenue situation in our sample of firms is described as so dominant in employees' cognitive, and more so the affective, consciousness, that it functions as a barometer not just for marketing's but for the organization's well-being as well. Consequently, marketing is viewed as the principal vehicle for delivering the larger mix of factors that contribute to the well-being of the organization and its employees. In sum, we briefly compare and contrast our findings with our initial notions about implementation developed from the literature (see Table 2).

Conceptual Framework and Propositions

Since planning and implementation processes interact and their interactions affect strategic outcomes, attribution of strategic outcomes to either the strategy content or the implementation process becomes untenable. Relatedly, a framework devoted exclusively to one fails not only to reflect managerial responses but also to hold real-world analogs. Therefore, our framework is titled "marketing strategy process" and portrays the development and deployment of marketing strategies in SMI firms. The

TABLE 2
Comparing Conventional Notions With Findings

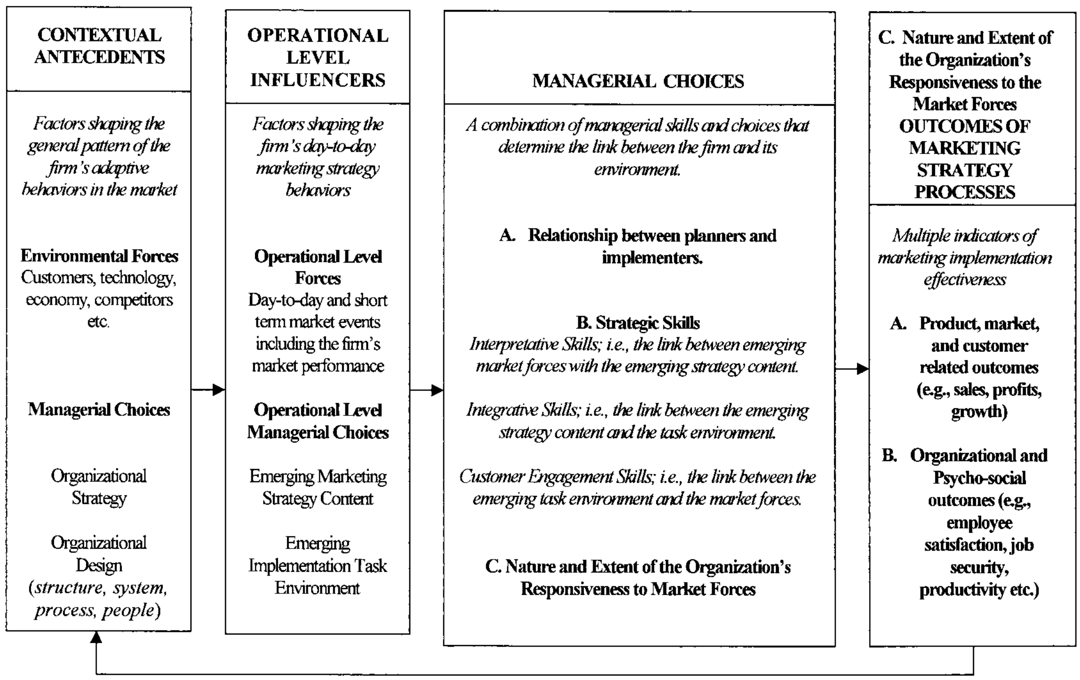
Current notions about marketing strategy and implementation suggest the following:	*Regarding functional marketing strategy processes in small and midsize industrial (SMI) firms, managers indicate the following:*
Planning and implementation are related. Effective strategy content is one that can be implemented (Hambrick and Cannella 1989). However, strategy content and process remain largely disconnected areas of inquiry (the former receives the bulk of academic attention).	The interaction between strategy content and process, and between planners and implementers, is the central determinant of an SMI firm's (a) customer and market focus, (b) rate of growth, and (c) marketing effectiveness. Deconstruction of planning from implementation or content from process fails to reflect actual managerial experiences.
Actions and resource deployment choices are either strategic or tactical, although the boundary between the two is recognized as subjective and diffuse.	Actions and resource deployment choices are strategic, tactical, and firefights. The incidence of knee-jerk responsiveness (neither strategic nor tactical actions) is high and consumes the most of managerial time and energies.
Strategy implementation is a function of marketing programs and managerial skills (Bonoma 1985); administrative mechanisms (Govindarajan 1988); and configuration of structure, systems, process, and rewards (Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986).	Managers fill the gap created by underdeveloped structures, systems, processes, and administrative mechanisms (concurring with Bart 1986). Listening, relationship and trust building, and strategic thinking skills are critical to implementation.

purpose of the framework is to portray how the marketing strategy process unfolds in real-life SMI firms and to draw theoretical implications for future research and practical implications for managers responsible for producing customer-, marketing-, and product-related objectives of the firm.

Figure 1 shows the contextual antecedents, operation-level forces, managerial choices, and strategy outcomes and their linkages implicated by the findings. The term *strategy effectiveness* and its variants used in the following discussions and propositions refer to the breadth of market and organizational outcomes including sales, growth, and psychosocial outcomes. Since all propositions emerge from a sample of SMI firms and refer to functional-level marketing strategy processes, no claims of generalization to other populations or strategies are made. However, given their large population and the key position SMI firms occupy in America's industrial landscape, our propositions about their strategy processes and strategic outcomes merit future testing in their own right. Finally, it is important to note that the factors from which we inferred the need for inductive, exploratory analysis are also the ones that shape the types of propositions that emerge from the study. Our propositions are descriptive (i.e., *X* occurs a particular way) and predictive (i.e., higher levels of *A* lead to higher levels of *B*). The former, unlike the latter, reflect generalizations aimed at stimulating thinking without obvious implications for future testing. Our attempts to develop both are consistent with our goals of portraying marketing strategy processes as they unfold in SMI firms.

Contextual antecedents and operational-level forces. Figure 1 shows our finding that the adaptive behaviors of SMI firms emerge from the complex interaction between environmental forces and managerial choices reflected in the firm's marketing strategy and its design. By *strategy*, we refer to the historic stream of decisions about the objectives, target markets, and other resource deployment choices that, whether intended or not, result in the SMI firm's present relationship with its customers and other environment constituents (see Fredrickson 1984). By *design*, we refer to the historic pattern of resource deployment choices and organization of activities that, whether intended or not, result in the SMI firm's current configuration of structure, systems, processes, people and rewards, and its ability to implement its agenda (see Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986). The strategy and design that managers inherit at the beginning of the fiscal year largely shape (i.e., simultaneously guide and constrain) their emergent choices during the implementation. Hence, the marketing strategy process is explained by the ongoing interaction between the operational-level manifestations of these forces. For instance, at the operational levels, (a) environmental forces are manifested in perceived day-to-day events including day-to-day actions of competitors, choices of customers, and other occurrences in the market environment and within the organization; (b) the strategy is manifested in the emerging marketing strategy content, that is, the configuration of current targeted customers and marketing mix that reflect historic managerial choices, coupled with the day-to-day fine-tuning improvisations undertaken for generating desired responses from customers; and (c) organizational design is manifested in the emerging task environment, that is, the organization of marketing's activities and the configuration of skills and people that reflect historic managerial choices, coupled with the day-to-day fine-tuning adjustments in the way managers and their teams deploy their time and energies. The interaction between managerial choices and the environmental forces, and not so much the intrinsic qualities of either, appear to shape the implementation process. In other words, two managers pursuing similar strategies in

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Framework of the Marketing Strategy Planning-Implementation Process in Small and Midsize Industrial Firms



similar firms can reach vastly different results because of the subtle, often imperceptible, differences in the way they fine-tune, improvise, and adapt the strategy content and the organization of implementation actions during the year. The general propositions relevant to this discussion are the following:

Proposition 1a: The interaction between the functional-level manifestations of the environment (i.e., day-to-day market and organizational events), the organizational strategy (i.e., the current and emerging marketing strategy content), and the organizational design (i.e., the current and emerging organization of marketing activities) shapes marketing strategy processes in SMI firms.

Proposition 1b: The planning-implementation interactive effect affects strategy effectiveness more significantly than the strategy content or the organization of activities.

The concern with adjustments and adaptations between the environment and managerial choices has been focal in the study of organizations (see Jennings and Seaman 1994). However, little from this stream of thinking has spoken to the day-to-day adaptive behaviors of firms from a functional marketing strategy perspective. The emergent properties of implementation suggest that post-priori analyses are likely to highlight significant disparities between strategy content at the beginning of the fiscal year and that which is eventually deployed in practice. For instance, we find that customers are targeted less by preplanning and more by emergent choices managers make about opportunities to pursue and choices about the time and energy devoted to cold-calling, prospecting, and responding to inquiries. Similarly, the firm's competitive position emerges more from the stream of promises made to customers and from the link between their expectations and their experiences with product usage than from deliberate choices about positioning alternatives. The most compelling evidence of the emergent properties of strategy content is derived, however, from the continual improvisations in the products, prices, distribution, and communication elements of the strategy. Since nearly all managers recount that day-to-day events and day-to-day improvisations and adaptations shape their actions, we propose the following:

Proposition 2a: Regardless of the level of formal market planning undertaken before the beginning of the fiscal year, the marketing strategy process is characterized more by an emergent rather than deliberate strategy content.

Proposition 2b: Higher levels of environmental turbulence necessitate higher levels of emergent strategy content for effective marketing strategy processes.

Propositions 1a and 1b and 2a and 2b urge new thinking about market planning that, in addition to an emphasis on market analysis-based foresight, integrates issues related to the ability of organizations to improvise and adapt on a day-to-day basis. The literature offers much in way of support for pursuing this line of inquiry. For instance, the notion of dynamic responsiveness to market forces has received significant attention (see Jaworski and Kohli 1993; McKee, Varadarajan, and Pride 1989). Similarly, the emergent properties of strategies have invited much discussion since Mintzberg and Water's (1985) efforts to differentiate deliberate and emergent strategies. Hutt et al. (1988) have traced the emergent processes in strategy formation, and Campbell (1991) has differentiated between grassroots emergent strategies that are more intuitive and deliberate strategies that are more analytical.

Managerial choices. Figure 1 shows our finding that managers ultimately choose how the macro-level environment and the organization's strategy and design are translated into their functional-level manifestations, how the interaction among these manifestations is fostered, and how the firm ultimately achieves its sales and other strategic objectives. Their learning and predictive pronouncements (i.e., if I do *X* in *Y* situations, then *Z* will result), largely based on their subjective interpretations of the day-to-day situations, shape (a) how the relationship between planners and implementers is managed, (b) how the firm responds to day-to-day market shifts, and (c) how the responsiveness between the firm and the market environment is developed and maintained.

Relationship between planners and implementers. How managers influence the information sharing that occurs and structure the relationship between planners and implementers appears to exert an inordinate impact on strategic outcomes because (a) the day-to-day interactions with customers and the market's emerging response to the firm's product offering function as the chief contingency in the strategy process environment, and (b) the emergent market environment often makes redundant the analysis of the situation that functioned as a basis for planning. When the functions are separated, the data offer arguments favoring a close, interactive linkage. The data offer even stronger arguments for making implementers responsible for planning as well. Such arrangements appear to help use the internalized, and frequently difficult to articulate, insights that planners possess about the firm's aspirations and capabilities, with the insights that implementers possess about the complex reality of the market and about what is accomplishable. Moreover, the condensation of two functions permits managers to move seamlessly between their tasks of improvising strategy content and adjusting the task environment, that is, a dynamic that our data show as the central determinant of marketing's strategic effectiveness. A manager describing the advantages of condensing the two functions notes,

> (Market planners must be the implementers as well because) to do it any other way is to make . . . unreal objectives (and) unreal goals. . . . If you have never done something, you can never really appreciate the difficulties and the time required, the ups and downs, the adjusting that is required to implement successfully.

Hence we propose:

Proposition 3a: Marketing strategy processes are more effective when implementers are also responsible for market planning, versus when the responsibilities are assigned to different persons.

Proposition 3b: Marketing strategy processes are more effective when higher quality information exchange and interactions occur between planners and implementers in the instances where the responsibilities are assigned to different persons.

These propositions concur with Bantel's (1997) findings about the interactions between product strategies, their implementation and the resulting synergies, and with Hambrick and Cannella's (1989) view about the inseparability of planning and implementation (also see Hennart 1994; Moorman and Miner 1998).

Strategic skills. These managerial-skill sets serve several interrelated functions and essentially define (a) how the day-to-day environment is interpreted and how the emergent strategy content and task environment are defined within the constraints of the available resources and the current pattern of their deployment; (b) how the organizational gap created by the underdeveloped (or absent) systems for planning, integrating, and informed decision making in the sampled SMI firms—that is, organizational systems and processes that the literature holds as central to implementation—is bridged (see Bart 1986; Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986); and (c) how a state of dynamic equilibrium is developed and attained between the firm and the market environment. By *dynamic equilibrium*, we refer to a state of interactions and exchange of information and resources between the market and the firm that results in the achievement of organizational and marketing objectives (see Hrebiniak and Joyce 1985). Managers anticipate and respond to market events and improvise, and to some degree enact their environment by actively choosing customers and marketing mix elements as well. Moreover, the market's emerging response influences future improvisation in strategy content and implementation actions. Both Bedeian (1990) and Zeithaml and Zeithaml (1984) make similar points about strategy process and management of the environment, and our findings concur with their views.

Interpretative skills. These skills are reflected in the continual process by which managers interpret day-to-day market events and improvise the marketing strategy content. Managers' subjective, symbolic interpretations of current events, expectations of future events, and beliefs about the possible consequences of their actions, coupled with their perceptions of the current marketing mix and its ability to affect the situation in which they are called to act, essentially shape the improvisations in the strategy content. The improvisations and adaptations occur because the existing elements of plans, often regardless of their foresight, fail to accommodate the entire breadth of relevant day-to-day market developments and accomplish intended objectives. The interpretative process essentially reduces the strategy-making process to a real-time conversation that managers have with themselves involving an intensely subjective, evaluative discussion of the emerging situation, available resources, and action alternatives. As a result of these cognitive processes or internalized conversations, new customers and segments are targeted; product features adapted; new materials for products used; prices and discounts renegotiated; promotional and other budgets redirected between trade advertising, personal selling, and trade shows; and new and existing relationships with market intermediaries redefined and negotiated.

It is important to note that the responsiveness occurring in real-time involves knee-jerk responses and firefights as much as it does purposeful decision-making, if not more. Moreover, the content of the strategy varies widely and managers respond differently even among firms operating in similar product/markets and facing similar environmental contingencies, because the strategy content is shaped as much by the subjective interpretations of managers' immediate situation as they are by their vision and longer term objectives. Our data-based view of strategy formulation based on managers' symbolic, interpretative processes strongly concurs with Bedeian's (1990) view of organizational adaptation. Hence the following proposition:

Proposition 4: Regardless of the level of formal market planning undertaken, the emergent choices about the strategy content result from a subjective, interpretative process more than rational analysis of objective information.

The conceptual underpinnings of this proposition and the importance of subjective, interpretative processes in strategy formulation and other organizational process are widely discussed in the literature (see Hart 1992; Thomas, Clark, and Gioia 1993). Bedeian's (1990) model of organizational adaptation includes the notion of symbolic processes as links between strategic choices and behaviors. Managers' subjective interpretations and sense-making (Weick 1995), and the notion of organizations as interpretative systems (Daft and Weick 1984), have attracted considerable discussion. For instance, Carpenter and Golden (1997) have assessed the relationship between the extent of latitude managers are allowed and their ability to improvise and take actions (also see Sparks 1994). Ginsberg and Venkatraman (1995) have found that subjective interpretations affect the ultimate commitment to the courses of actions undertaken to resolve issues devoted to technological change in organizations. This proposition is also aligned with Eisenhardt's (1992) study, which examined how real-time decisions based on subjective interpretations are made, and with Langley (1990), who found that despite formal information analysis, organizations make as many subjective and interpretative decisions as they make rational ones. It is important to recognize, however, that interpretation and sense-making are largely discussed in the strategy formulation context (see Franwick et al. 1994; Gruca and Sudharshan, 1995) and that their impact on strategy implementation, particularly in the small-firm context, remains relatively unexplored.

Our data also show that managerial energies devoted to listening and obtaining reality checks are some of the distinctive antecedents of effective interpretative processes. We find, for instance, that when interpretations and subsequent improvisations occur in the absence of concrete links to the physical reality of customers and markets, the strategy process becomes indistinguishable from random, chaotic actions. Relatedly, we find that effective interpreters take multiple steps to test the worth of their subjective, socially constructed realities and develop a host of processes by which their day-to-day decisions can receive reality checks. In particular, effective interpreters emerge as highly effective listeners; that is, they meet more often and spend more time with a wide array of constituencies, familiarizing themselves with the divergent voices and concerns that exist in their environment. Listening is recounted as the most favored way of staying connected to the objective reality of the firm and its environment, and as the key precursor to intelligent, informed responsiveness. A manager explains,

> Listen first, listen to your customers, listen to your employees, get feedback . . . if you are not willing to listen to what is going on, you are going to get paralyzed. . . . You have got to have a plan—don't be too rigid about it, whether the feedback is coming from customers, . . . the manufacturing manager, or the guy on the line who has trouble building a product because it was not designed right. You have got to listen and be willing to make changes.

Similarly, a manager describing the importance of listening to effective planning notes,

> (While) . . . writing of the strategic goals or the strategic plans, the first thing I have to do is to listen to what the customer wants to do. . . It's called listening to your customers' needs. It doesn't get any more complicated. If you listen to your customers, they will tell you what they want, if you can fulfill it, you've got a business.

Listening (a) generates actionable information because it originates firsthand from the very constituents whose behaviors managers are attempting to influence; (b) informs managers about how contingencies are interpreted by different people in different ways and promotes a wider, deeper understanding of the situation in which they are called to make decisions and take actions; and (c) connects them with day-to-day market events and bridges the gap created by the absence of formal information systems viewed as central features of effective implementation (e.g., Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986; also see Shreyogg and Steinmann 1987). Listening emerges as a central process by which managers' cognitive structures are modified (see Crouch and Basch 1997) and to the learning that occurs as a result of their thoughts and actions (see Mintzberg 1990).

Integrative skills. These skills are largely responsible for shaping the interaction between the emerging strategy content and the implementation task environment. This finding concurs with the literature's view of integration, that is, the coming together of multiple organizational skills to achieve a common organizational purpose (see Gupta, Raj, and Wilemon 1986). The findings add value largely because they show the breadth of integrative challenges that emerge in the context of marketing implementation in SMI firms and shed light on how managers deploy their integrative skills in practice. For instance, the complexity of integrative tasks appears to vary with the diversity of orientations that are required to come together and focus on executing the emergent strategy content. At its simplest level, managers note that integration is about creatively reallocating their own time and energy for deploying their day-to-day decisions. However, since emerging strategies hold implications for their teams (mostly sales persons and support staff), integration also involves the translation of decisions into action steps and assignment of tasks to people, that is, definition of who does what and when, and how these activities are sequenced and coordinated. For instance, managers and their teams are required, often at short notice, to attend trade shows, to make cold calls to emerging customer segments, and to increase contact with dealers and independent representatives to reach new customer segments. Integration becomes more complex when the emerging strategy content requires the cooperation of people over whom managers have little or no formal authority. Noting the inherent difficulties of gaining people's unequivocal support for the duration of the year, a manager states, "I guess I would define an ideal implementation as one where, ahead of time, everybody agreed on exactly what it was we were trying to accomplish."

Similarly, a vice president of marketing describing the challenge of gaining cooperation from well-intentioned people across the organization for marketing activities—when they are otherwise focused on their own diverse agendas—states,

> I have found all too often that strategic planning is a once-a-year exercise, where there is a beautiful plan produced and then it's presented to the management and to some extent it falls by the way side; that's what we are talking about. It's a shame because (when people fail to show enthusiasm for marketing's agenda), I don't think people deliberately say that "I don't believe in that plan, I ain't gonna work to it [*sic*]."

Hence, integration involves persuasion and relationship building, aimed at convincing others that channeling their energies toward marketing activities is value creating. Managers spend considerable energies building interpersonal relationships with key managers from other functional groups (particularly production and R&D), developing a meeting of minds, gaining their focus on marketing and customer-directed tasks, and demonstrating how collaborating with marketing effort is in their best interests. Consider the descriptions of two managers who describe the process by which the meeting of minds occurs:

> *Manager 1:* A lot of time (is spent trying) to get the product plan, the marketing plan, a manufacturing plan, an engineering plan, (product) testing. *You* know all those aspects. A lot of time is spent trying to persuade people that we really need to do this.
>
> *Manager 2:* I get everyone to buy into the plan. I do just as much selling inside these doors as I do outside.

The task of integration becomes more complex yet, when cooperation is sought from people who hold divergent, if not necessarily adversarial, agendas—including people from production, R&D and engineering, salespersons and customer service, as well as customers. We find that managers develop a meeting of minds and gain higher levels of cooperation when their interpersonal relationships with others are characterized as value creating and trusting. Consider the responses of three managers who identify trust as a critical determinant and outcome of their relationship-building skills:

> *Manager 1:* (Trust) really breaks the barriers down. My sales managers can make million decisions, and I let them do that. It is a lot of trust. A good thing about being in this business is that we can take risks.

Manager 2: You have to have trust in your people (so) that (they) are doing the things underneath you and have them report back to you. (When you say) "Where are you on this? Is this done?" They may give you some detail. Well, you really don't care about the detail, but as long as it's getting done, that's the key.

Describing the importance of developing trust with resellers, a manager notes,

> There is one factor that I live in by, and die by with my VARS (value-added resellers), is they (have got to) know that I am giving them a level playing field and they trust me. They trust me to be ethical, they trust me to be consistent, and they trust me to be fair. If I am not that kind of person, chances are they're not going to trust me. I have got to show that I trust them. That's amazing. You can tell when two people don't trust each other versus they do, how much work they can get done. . . . People want to do business with the things that they can have fun with and trust.

Effective integration, we find, also calls for the deployment of strategic thinking skills, since some types of decisions gain more cooperation from people within and outside the firm than others. Managers are thinking strategically, the data show, when their day-to-day decisions and interactions with others reflect integrated insights into the firm's diverse and often-conflicting interests and orientations. Strategic thinkers (a) demonstrate awareness of the multiple ways in which market events are interpreted by organizational and other constituents; (b) identify more than one task implication of the emerging strategy content before making decisions; (c) evaluate possible outcomes of their decisions both in terms of the extent to which the team and other internal and external constituents will support these decisions, as well as the likely response from customers and competitors. Describing the importance of knowing what, how, and why others think and do what they do, and incorporating that knowledge in day-to-day decision-making, a manager explains, "You as an individual, first you have to know what you are doing. You have to exude that kind of understanding; you have to be almost a sociologist, psychologist . . . to be a good marketer."

The deployment of integrative skills appears to serve multiple functions. They ensure that managerial intents are translated into tasks and assigned to people. Similarly, participants are assured that the manager is aware of, and responsive to, their concerns. Relatedly, the link participants can readily observe between their own interests and constraints, and the manager's day-to-day marketing decisions, functions to energize and build cohesion. More important, integrative skills appear to overcome the problems created by underdeveloped (or absent) integrative mechanisms in SMI firms (see Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986; Govindarajan 1988 for the role of administrative mechanisms). Concurring with Bart (1986), our findings show that managers fulfill the integrative-mechanisms gap and overcome much of the disconnectedness that results from the emerging nature of plans, unclear task implications, and the spatial barriers that can exist between functional groups. A vice president of marketing explains,

> I don't want an office here in front. I'm right down in the middle of the sales department. The reason why I am down in the sales department is that I want to know what is going on. And if you happen to overhear something, you can step in and help out. I will normally walk back twice a week to the engineering department to become aware of what's happening. So you can change strategies quickly. It is extremely important because if someone just plods along and they may not think it's important to tell you. You might lose 4 or 5 or 6 weeks. Well, if you lose 4, 5, or 6 weeks, then I could lose a million to 2 million dollars in that period of time.

In sum, we find managers called to function as the principal organizers of marketing strategy processes. While propositions of positive linkages between the skills we identify and effective marketing strategy processes appear intuitively obvious, the near absence of formal planning and information systems, and integrative mechanisms among the sampled firms, raises the following propositions:[1]

Proposition 5a: Managers' listening skills have a more significant impact on marketing strategy process effectiveness than formal information and decision support systems.

Proposition 5b: Managers' strategic thinking skills have a more significant impact on marketing strategy process effectiveness than formal planning systems.

Proposition 5c: Managers' interpersonal relationship-building skills have a more significant impact on marketing strategy process effectiveness than formal integrative mechanisms present in the firm.

There is considerable evidence to support the testing of these propositions in the literature. For instance, listening to customers is defined as a feature central to the new marketing concept (Webster 1994), to improving service quality (Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml 1984), and to effective selling (see Sanchez 1998). Similarly, the literature supporting the virtues of strategic thinking is immense (see Christensen 1997; Liedtka 1998; Mintzberg 1994). Our findings also concur with the notions that the process of strategic thinking and the day-to-day incremental improvisations and adaptations in strategy content and the organization occurs as an ongoing conversation in a way that it resembles a managerial soliloquy (see Harari 1995) and that in its absence, the strategy process becomes indis- tinguishable from disconnected chaos-inducing firefights and stopgap actions (see Rouse 1997).

Customer engagement skills. Execution of decisions and implementation-directed actions represent the ultimate confrontation of managerial choices and the market reality. Very few marketing goals are accomplished unless managers can influence team and organizational members to take actions commensurate with the emerging plans and engage key market constituents. Therefore, customer engagement skills essentially link the emerging task environment with the emergent market environment. These skills are reflected in actions taken by managers and their teams to contact and build relationships with customers, to influence their behaviors, to gain their support, to solve their problems, and to obtain sales and revenues. A manager, explaining the challenges associated with the process of ensuring that people operating closest to customers and somewhat removed from the firm and the manager's scrutiny will perform according to plan, notes,

> [A plan] dilutes down the line significantly. It goes through a lot of hands before it gets to the front line if you will, where the negotiation [between the firm and the customer] both from an engineering [product specs] and a commercial standpoint [prices, delivery perspectives] takes place. It is a matter of communication. I may from my position tell him [sales staff] what orchestrations to make in terms of what customers to visit, who makes the visits, what kind of presentations are made and what kind of follow-ups are done. . . . I talk literally to everyone of the application engineers [sales], which is a step removed from me.

Engagement of customers, via face-to-face interaction, appears to inordinately stretch the initiatives and creativity of those involved, since real-time improvisations are central to the process by which day-to-day market contingencies, customer concerns and objections, and competitive activities are accommodated and market objectives are achieved. Two managers note,

Manager 1: The key is . . . to have people that can think for themselves, that are basically independent thinkers, and can carry things through. Now if they can't accomplish that, then you are going to have to hire someone who can. You can't tell someone exactly what to do, because if you did, you wouldn't need them because by the time you told them, you could do it yourself. . . . You make the individuals working for you feel that they are actually a contributor. That's important.

Manager 2: I believe in delegation. But I believe in trying to explain to people to make sure that they understand what the goals are, and I also believe in making some suggestions for how they can achieve those goals if I felt that those were good suggestions. But, the bottom line is that the person is the most responsible for making things happen.

This finding concurs with Mintzberg's (1998) observation that "leaders energize people by treating them not as detachable 'human resources' . . . but as respected members of a cohesive social system. When people are trusted, they do not have to be empowered" (p. 145). A manager describing the importance of self-initiated creativity in engaging customers notes,

> Listen to your people (sales and support staff), find out what they are doing now, keep giving them all the things that they need, and stay the heck out of their way. Guide them when they do something that you know is wrong . . . if you have got a problem, and you are not reachable, guess what, they will figure out a way how to solve that problem. . . . They may not solve the problem exactly the same way I did. But that's okay, but we can talk about how we can solve their problem and see if there was a better way, . . . I don't believe I have all the ideas.

To foster initiative, risk-taking, and creativity, effective managers appear to adopt the role of facilitators and conduits of resources and information to their sales and support staff in order to support their individual initiative and creativity. Two managers describe their role in fostering creative behaviors the following way:

Manager 1: [My function is that of a] facilitator, implementer, keep people happy, making coffee . . . making things happen.

Manager 2: [I foster creativity by] letting them be a part of the decision-making process, letting them get credit for what they have accomplished. Letting them take responsibility for what they [have] failed to accomplish. Be a part of the whole planning operation and the whole implementation.

The view that actions are a critical feature of marketing only reinforces what is currently known and widely discussed (e.g., Jaworski and Kohli 1993). What is somewhat distinctive in the data are the findings about how managers generate commitment from team and organizational members, as well as customer-focused, coordinated activities and insights into how they foster high levels of creativity and innovation in the process by which a desired response from customers is obtained. To this end, the data highlight two important and somewhat interrelated components of customer engagement skills. Interestingly, reward systems are not mentioned once by the 10 managers in the pilot and 40 managers in the main study in more than 60 hours of in-depth, exploratory interviews as determinants of team members' initiatives or creativity. Instead, we find that the clarity about tasks and performance evaluation standards that managers foster among the participants affects how they engage customers. In other words, clarity about what is expected of them and when, and how they will be evaluated, appears to influence (a) how focused each team member stays while engaging customers in relative isolation from one another, and (b) how they improvise in real-time situtations, solve customer problems, and obtain their commitment. A manager, describing the ideal outcome of his interactions with the sales/support staff, notes, "[I have gained the commitment of my sales staff when they] say, 'I understand what it is that I am trying to accomplish and I agree with it, and I understand how I am going to be measured and I agree with it.'"

In addition, the information and resource independence that managers foster among team members also appears have an impact on how they engage customers. The data suggest that team members' perceptions of their access to resources and information are central to the risks they are willing to take while engaging customers in real-time interactions, and to the initiative and creativity they display in their implementation-related activities. About channeling information to people operating closest to customers, a manager notes,

> Each one of those people [sales persons] knows what they are supposed to do. They know what the end result [goal] is. We keep them informed on what's happening. And let me go back again to communications, the salesman knows exactly what is happening, they know when products are coming out, they know what's coming out of engineering, they know when it's coming, they know when we've got a problem, they know they can start putting their stories together for the customers.

In sum, our findings urge additional research directed at assessing the unique impact of the factors we identify on the coordination, creativity, and risk-taking behaviors team members exhibit during marketing strategy processes. On the basis of these findings, we propose the following:

Proposition 6a: Marketing strategy processes are more effective when participants display high levels of clarity about their task expectations.

Proposition 6b: Marketing strategy processes are more effective when participants display high levels of clarity about the criteria by which their performance will be evaluated.

Proposition 6c: Marketing strategy processes are more effective when participants display a greater belief in the notion that they have access to the information necessary to perform their jobs.

Proposition 6d: Marketing strategy processes are more effective when participants display a greater belief in the notion that they have access to the resources necessary to perform their jobs.

Much of the support for these propositions emerges from the empowerment (see Thomas and Velthouse 1990) and sales literature that parallels our data-derived notion that implementation processes are so characterized by change that simple job descriptions break down in dynamic environments and that those who can gain and maintain clarity about what is expected of them and when, and about how their performance will be evaluated, are more capable of building enduring, mutually satisfying relationships with market constituents. For instance, clarity about performance evaluations is associated with improved service (see Pinto and Covin 1992), and task clarity is associated with effective sales force motivation (Shapiro and Doyle 1983; Winer 1982), their transition and socialization (Monoky 1998), and their job satisfaction (Ting 1996).

Nature and rate of responsiveness. Managerial choices reflected by the frequency and creativity of improvisations and adaptations appear to affect a host of strategy process outcomes, including the firm's market orientation, rate of growth, and accomplishment of objectives. By *frequency*, we refer to how often managers improvise and adapt the strategy content and the task environment in response to market changes. By *creativity*, we refer to how much the improvisations and adaptations represent a shift from the status quo, address customer/market needs, reaffirm and improve relationships with market constituents, and accomplish goals. In general, we find that the frequency mirrors the rate, and creativity mirrors the magnitude of market volatility.

Managing frequency. Managing the frequency represents an important managerial choice because we find that it has an impact on the firm's market orientation and rate of growth. For instance, stable markets, distant competitors, and infrequent market shifts require infrequent improvisations in the strategy content and promote a distinctive focus on the firm's internal operations. Activities such as production scheduling, material procurement, and administration of incoming customer orders become focal issues for the marketing function. In one notable instance, faced with a highly stable market and distant competitors, marketing implementation is entrusted to a manager of administrative services (see Table 1). Conversely, when day-to-day market events spell a high degree of change as they do for the bulk of the firms in the study, the frequency of improvisations and adaptations intensify and the implementers' focus shifts noticeably toward customers and market-related activities. Also, the frequency appears directly related to the rate of organizational growth. Each improvisation and each adaptation represents a new way of stretching and using available resources in pursuit of new, somewhat marginally different, goals. Highly frequent improvisations and adaptations translate into the achievement of a series of marginally new goals via a series of marginally new means. In other words, frequent improvisations and adaptations in the strategy content and task environment undertaken to accommodate day-to-day market shifts emerge as the principal means of growth in the SMI firms sampled and are central to the process by which they increase sales and revenues, and expand operations. The data-derived link between improvisations, adaptations, and growth mirrors Hrebiniak and Joyce's (1985) view about the interactions between strong managerial choices and environmental influences, and the resulting turbulent context of organizational adaptation. Hence we propose the following:

Proposition 7a: The higher the frequency of improvisations and adaptations among the emerging strategy content and the implementation task environment, the higher the firm's market orientation (i.e., focus on customers, competitors, market intermediaries overshadows the one on internal constituents, including team members, members of other functional groups, and internal process and administrative issues).

Proposition 7b: The higher the frequency of improvisations and adaptations among the emerging strategy content and the implementation task environment, the higher the rate of organizational growth.

The importance of testing Proposition 7a and Proposition 7b stems not just from our data-derived view that managing organizational growth represents one of the focal struggles of managers in our sample of SMI firms but also from the macroeconomic view that growing smaller firms into midsize, and midsize into larger, firms is critical for sustained job creation (see Thurow 1996). Strong support for Proposition 7b comes from Brown and Eisenhardt (1997), although in the context of organizational change (versus growth) and product innovation (versus marketing strategy processes). They find, for instance, that successful innovation rooted in participants' freedom to improvise in ways that are (a) not too strongly constrained by the deliberate strategy so as to instill inflexibility and (b) not too flexible so as to mirror knee-jerk responsiveness and result in chaos.

Managing creativity. The creativity of responsiveness reflected in the stream of real-time decisions about improvisations and adaptations that build and reinforce relationships with customers, and maintain or improve the firm's market position despite competitive and other disruptive market shifts, appears to directly affect strategy effectiveness. On the other hand, improvisations are uncreative and more representative of firefights when actions fail to generate an enduring improvement in the relationship between the firm and market constituents. Our study presents strong arguments for differentiating between the two. Consider that all managers in our study recount firefights as the enduring descriptor of their involvement in implementation and half ($n = 20$) recount it as their principal activity. Two managers, describing the activities that consume most of their time and energy during the planning-implementation process note,

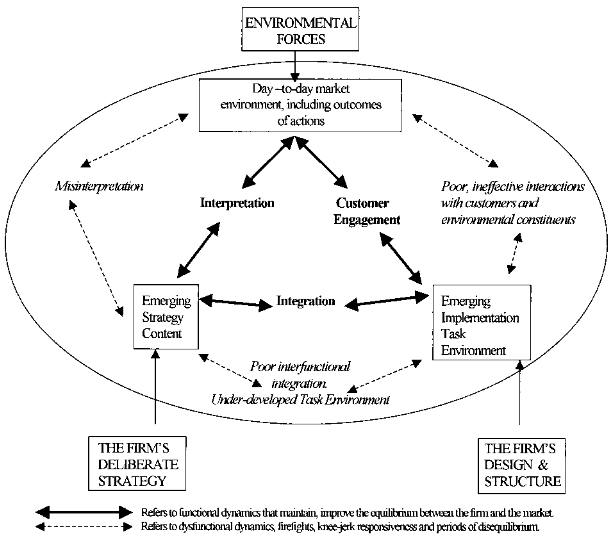
Manager 1: I am a fireman . . . I put fires out. I have to be reactive. Less and less of my time is being able to spent [*sic*] on where I think it should be spent. Firemen, that's what we do, we are firemen.

Manager 2: It's taking care of, keeping customers satisfied, if there is a problem, get out there and put out the fire, bring information back here, let's address it. How can we fix it? Is it fixable? How long will it take us to fix it, and how much is it going to cost? And then you try to keep the people, and you try to salvage *that* [pointing to the fire].

Our findings therefore emphasize the importance of conceptually differentiating between improvisations and adaptations that are functional, synergistic, and move the firm purposefully forward and those that are dysfunctional, regressive, and upset the dynamic equilibrium between the firm and its environment. The former, depicted in bold in Figure 2, refer to periods in which the improvisations effectively develop and maintain a state of dynamic equilibrium with the environment. The latter, depicted in italics in Figure 2, refer to periods of disequilibriums, when the frequency coupled with the creativity of improvisations (or lack thereof) prevent progress toward predetermined market and other goals.

Many periods of dysfunctional strategy processes and the firefights that occur appear to originate from misinterpretation of market events and inadequate adaptations in strategy content. A sluggish response to market shifts, coupled with periods of interfunctional incompatibility, result in poor interfunctional coordination and stopgap actions. Most energy devoted to improvisations and adaptation are described in terms analogous to knee-jerk, stopgap actions of overwhelmed, underprepared managers and underorganized SMI firms. For instance, knee-jerk responsiveness in our study relates largely to managerial guesses about what is likely to work in the short run or shots in the dark resulting most often from (a) unilateral attempts to address deficiencies in plans/planning, (b) unrealistic promises to customers and market intermediaries, (c) unrealistic views or plain failure to predict the nature of support their decisions are likely to gain from important constituencies within and outside the organization. In other words, the jazz-like improvisations that occur are liberally interspersed with resource and time-wasting motions in practice (see Eisenhardt 1997). Due to strong linkages between strategy content and the task environment, relatively minor flaws in interpretation, integration, or engagement tend to magnify, to gain momentum, and to exacerbate the dysfunctionality.

FIGURE 2
Periods of Equilibrium and Periods of Dysfunction



While any proposition emerging from this finding—that an inverse relationship exists between high incidences of firefights and strategic effectiveness—is intuitively obvious, it highlights the need for new thinking that can deliver new theoretical and practical insights. While there are a host of valuable insights about improvisations and adaptations that improve organizational and strategic effectiveness (see Brown and Eisenhardt 1997; Moorman and Miner 1998), the literature has paid relatively little attention to the knee-jerk responsiveness that occurs yet fails to produce much in the way of positive results.

IMPLICATIONS

We devote this discussion to three areas that our study identifies as important future research endeavors. We also address some of the practical applications of our findings and draw implications for managers responsible for deploying marketing plans and producing results in competitive environments.

Managing the Planning-Implementation Interface

We find that two managers beginning with similar strategy content can end the year with vastly differing results because of the subtle differences in their ways of managing day-to-day interactivity between planning and implementation. For practitioners, our findings provide strong arguments favoring the assignment of planning and implementation responsibilities to the same person(s).

Our findings also call for new ways of thinking about and conceptualizing marketing strategy processes in smaller firms. Since planning and implementation interact, and because their interactions affect outcomes, a particular marketing outcome cannot be attributed independently to one or the other. All that can be inferred is that the outcome is attributable to the plan, or the implementation, or both—not particularly useful conclusions. Currently, because marketing strategy content research is fairly isolated from marketing strategy process research, defining the enduring features of a sound marketing plan or a sound marketing implementation process represents a major challenge. New, integrative conceptualizations of marketing strategy planning-implementation that provide new insights into the interactive effect are likely to better reflect how marketing processes unfold in real life and produce implications that speak directly to managerial concerns.

Deliberate and Emergent Strategy Linkage

Our study also highlights the need for newer, better conceptualizations of the deliberate-emergent marketing strategy linkages in multiple contexts, because we find both important, strongly interactive, and directly affecting marketing outcomes. Describing the importance of both deliberate and emergent strategy, a manager notes,

> To grow you have to have a plan, and you have to adhere to the plan, and the plan has to be flexible enough to reflect change necessary to meet the marketing conditions, and to meet the objectives as other things change.

For instance, we find that (a) marketing strategy processes are strongly shaped by emergent strategies; (b) emergent strategies are mostly anchored in the deliberate strategy content, that is, emerging resource deployment choices are mostly anchored in historic resource deployment choices; and (c) the frequency of improvisations and adaptations in the emergent strategy determine the customer/market orientation and the rate of growth in SMI firms, that is, pressing concerns of a large segment of marketing managers. Our data also provide testable notions about why emergent strategies are necessary and why they emerge. For instance, we find the emergent strategy necessitated by, and representative of, the firm's adaptive response to a fast changing environment. We also find that emergent strategies arise from the interactions between managers' subjective interpretations of the situation in which they find themselves (including their perceptions of the deliberate strategy). We find both important because it is the complex ricochets and interactions that occur between deliberate and emergent strategies that appear to ultimately determine how strategy processes unfold in practice (see Hart and Banbury [1994] for similar findings about strategy-making in other contexts).

Our findings offer several clues to aid future conceptualizations of the deliberate-emergent strategy linkage. For instance, we find that managers are called to balance the need to improvise in ways that are creative with the need to improvise without losing touch with the physical reality of the environment and the deliberate strategy. When emergent strategies represent unrealistic departures from the deliberate strategy and lose connection with the physical reality of the marketplace, we find that managerial actions become indistinguishable from knee-jerk, resource-wasting responsiveness. Entirely emergent strategies without clear anchors to the deliberate strategy leave the firm directionless and in a constant firefighting mode. On the other hand, we find that strict adherence to the deliberate strategy in changing environments tends to spell failure (for similar findings in the product innovation/organizational change context, see Brown and Eisenhardt 1997). Our study shows that to understand how, and more so why, marketing strategy processes unfold the way they do and move beyond structural explanation of what occurs, it is important to fully investigate the deliberate-emergent strategy linkage and to explore the subjective, interpretative processes from which emergent strategies arise. Similarly, new conceptualizations, findings, and implications are necessary to speak to the practical reality of managers called to improvise in a competitive environment on a day-to-day basis. They are also necessary for developing a better understanding of how and why small firms grow into larger firms.

Understanding Firefights

Although firefights and knee-jerk improvisations emerge as dominant in the experiences of all managers in our study, and half describe it as their principal implementation-related activity, very little in terms of theoretical development reflects this day-to-day reality (see Mintzberg 1973 for a notable exception). We speculate that this neglect relates to the state of the art that is strongly tethered to the strategy-tactic dichotomy. Currently, that which is not strategic (i.e., result of deliberate, rational choices for the long term) is regarded as tactical (result of intuitive choices for the short term), even though the boundaries between the two are less clearly articulated in the literature. Both refer to active and proactive choice-making based on deliberate or intuitive analysis of the situation in which a manager is called to take action. The roots of firefights—that is, knee-jerk responsiveness of overwhelmed managers aimed at damage control and solving problems that were foreseeable or avoided altogether—are neither strategic nor tactical, since their origins are neither deliberate nor intuitive choices. Clear differences appear to lie in the cognitive processes that precede strategic and tactical decisions and those that precede firefights. Therefore, new thinking relatively untethered to the strategy- tactic dichotomy, and that recognizes the bounded-rational and extrarational choice-making, is clearly needed to alleviate the problems managers face with firefights and stopgap actions (see Hart and Banbury [1994] for similar concerns with the limitations of dichotomous conceptualizations in strategic management research).

Managers as Organizers

We cannot speculate whether SMI firms are a separate species of organizations, meaningfully different from larger firms (sales greater than $500 million), since we did not include the latter firms in our study. Similarly, we cannot speculate whether our findings about managers as organizers of marketing strategy processes are also relevant to other contexts or are unique to SMI firms. However, the holistic perspectives managers hold about planning-implementation, the deliberate-emergent linkage, and their inordinate concern with psychosocial outcomes of marketing processes suggest that these questions are worth exploring. Our findings provide some evidence about how managers as organizers overcome underdeveloped (or absent) structural and systemic apparatuses (i.e., problems more likely to be observed in smaller rather than larger firms) by developing specific skills and finding innovative ways of deploying their time and energy. In Table 3, we distill these findings and highlight the important role of managers as organizers in ways that can speak to the practical, day-to-day realities of managers responsible for marketing strategy processes in SMI firms.

CONCLUSION

Our study reaffirms the notion that planning, not so much the plan, is important because planning endures as a day-to-day, emergent activity, whereas the plan loses relevance in a turbulent market. Our study adds value by (a) showing how effective managers implement marketing strategies in real-life SMI firms, overcome the talking-doing gap, and achieve a host of marketing and psychosocial objectives despite high levels of environmental turbulence; (b) identifying the precise strategic skills (interpretation, integration, and customer engagement) managers develop and deploy in SMI firms to overcome the problems created by a turbulent environment and by the weaknesses of their firm's structural and systemic mechanisms; and (c) highlighting the theoretical and practical importance of developing integrative frameworks that portray the interactions between planning and

TABLE 3
Implications for Managers

When the literature refers to	*Effective managers in SMI firms respond by*
Formal planning systems.	Developing an organizational posture that favors continuous improvisations in the strategy content. Devoting considerable time/energy listening to the market.
Formal information systems.	Ensuring that the implications of their day-to-day listening are translated into updated marketing strategy content.
Formal feedback and control mechanisms.	Developing strong personal relationships with others characterized by high levels of trust. Developing and deploying strategic thinking skills.
Formal mechanisms for integrating multiple functional groups.	Transforming their role from controllers to providers and conduits of resources and information. Supporting individual initiative and creativity.
Sophisticated training, motivation, and reward systems.	Translating the day-to-day changes in the marketing strategy content into task implications for employees/team members. Continually ensuring that team members/employees and other participants in the implementation process are clear about what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated.

implementation, and deliberate and emergent strategies so as to provide better explanations of what occurs in practice and insights into how and why these interactions affect the firm's customer/market orientation and its rate of growth.

Our study suffers from a host of weaknesses that can be overcome in subsequent efforts to better understand the marketing strategy process in multiple contexts. First, the convenient nature of the sample, the formative in-depth interviews, the small sample size, and the resulting framework—although consistent with the exploratory intents—fail to generate generalizable results. Second, our findings are influenced by many factors that we did not control, including rate of market growth, qualifications and industry experience of managers, and the impact of government regulations. Third, our interpretations and data analysis are clearly influenced by the writing of many of the scholars we cite (e.g., Bonoma 1985; Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986; Hrebiniak and Joyce 1984) and have shaped how we came to view the strategic behaviors of the firm. Although we used an external reviewer to develop an independent analysis and tried to rigorously reconcile our findings as suggested by scholars of qualitative research (see Miles and Huberman 1984), our own beliefs, points of view, and biases have clearly shaped the process by which we developed our findings. Fourth, since we included only SMI firms, we cannot identify the precise points at which our findings depart from those originating from larger firms. It is likely that SMI firms are different from larger firms, but our data do not permit the drawing of such inferences. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study is a clear weakness. A time-series approach can provide a better view of the adaptive processes. Currently, all our findings are anchored in managers' ability to reconstruct their experiences from their memory and represent a clear weakness of our study.

APPENDIX A
Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe your *actual* experiences with implementing your marketing plans and strategies? In what way were you personally involved?

2. How are marketing plans developed around here? Is there some kind of process? What are the major issues you encounter when you plan marketing programs and strategies?

3. What is the relationship between those mostly involved in developing the marketing plan and those mostly involved in implementing it?

4. Is there a relationship between planning marketing strategies and implementation? What are some of the most important things a person mostly involved in developing plans should know about implementation? What are some of the most important things a person mostly involved in implementing should know about developing plans?

5. As you reflect on what you did to implement, where did you put most of your ideas and energies? What required the most attention? Why was that?

6. Which were the most important groups you interacted with when you implemented your strategy? What were some of the major issues you encountered? What did you actually do? How did you manage to get them to support your efforts?

7. Did you meet your targeted goals in that period? What contributed the most to these outcomes? What results count the most?

8. What, if anything, have you learned about implementations? What has the organization learned from implementation?

9. Suppose you had the next 2 weeks to train a new person to take over your implementation responsibilities. . . . Are there some insights that you would want to share with this person?

APPENDIX B
Description of Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the guidelines of Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Patton (1990). The following is a brief synopsis of the procedure followed:

Stage 1. Gaining familiarity and fluency with the data. We listened to each tape-recorded interview at least once before we transcribed it. We made notes during the interview and during the transcription. We listened to each taped interview while reading the transcript and made further notes. The notes were mostly attempts to draw generalizations and record the learning that occurred. For instance, the substance of two notes was as follows:

This manager seems to speak of market planning and implementation as if they are conceptually the same things and seems to suggest that one way to think about strategy process is as a "planning-implementation" gestalt, where the interrelationship is strong enough to prevent meaningful deconstruction. See similar notes made in Firm A, and so on.

This manager (see Firms C, D) talks about outcomes of marketing implementation in terms of sales, revenues and such, *but also* issues like employee satisfaction and job security for *his* crew. It is likely that the desired outcomes of marketing strategies include psychosocial, human outcomes as well.

The listening, transcription, and note writing helped us gain high levels of fluency and familiarity with the data, and was central to our eventual ability to compare and contrast responses of several managers and draw generalizations.

Stage 2. Recording. In this stage, we prepared charts for each of the nine questions in the interview protocol. We systematically recorded what each manager had said in response to a particular question. This allowed us to prepare frequency counts such as the following: 20 managers view marketing implementation no differently from managing sales; 11 view it as tasks and activities. Implementation is actions; and 9 talk about implementation as if it is synonymous with planning or strategy formulation.

This process was iterative, that is, the themes were constantly redeveloped in light of new evidence, and frequency counts were altered when a decision was made to classify a particular response in one category versus another based on actual descriptions of managers. When this process was complete, we developed multiple themes in the responses of each manager to each question along with supporting evidence (actual quotes) as well as frequency counts.

While we were conducting this analysis, all transcripts, with the identities of respondents and firms concealed, were made available to an experienced, qualified external researcher hired for the purpose of conducting an independent analysis and helping us reduce some of the problems associated with internal consistency of findings. The two sets of independently derived findings were compared and contrasted during five meetings lasting an average of 3 hours each. Each finding was checked for consistency and reconciled with the independent analyst's findings.

Stage 3. Drawing generalizations and developing box-and-arrow models. In this stage, we attempted to draw generalizations about how the marketing strategy process unfolded in all of the 40 firms in the second stage of the study. The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 is a result of this iterative attempt.

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NOTE

1. Measurement implications are as follows: *listening skills* can be assessed from the combination of multiple indicators, including

(a) the frequency of meetings with people (employees, team members, and external constituents),
(b) the diversity in the functional affiliations of the people met (internally),
(c) the diversity of customers met (including market intermediaries),
(d) the time spent during meetings with people,
(e) the extent to which people (employees, team members, customers) believe that the manager listens to their concerns, and
(f) the extent to which people (employees, team members, customers) believe that the manager responds to their concerns.

Strategic thinking skills can be assessed from the combination of multiple indicators, including

(g) the number of alternative courses of actions considered before decisions are made and
(h) the extent to which the likely consequences of each action alternative are explored in terms of (1) the support they will generate within the firm (team members, other functional groups) and (2) the support they will generate from market intermediaries (dealers, distributors).

Interpersonal relationship-building skills can be assessed from the combination of multiple indicators, including

(i) the extent to which team members, heads of other departments (in our instance, production and R&D functions), believe that their interactions with the manager are value creating; and
(j) the extent to which team members, heads of other departments (in our instance, production and R&D functions), believe that their relationship with the manager is characterized by high degrees of (1) cognitive trust, that is, referring to

the competency of the manager; and (2) affective trust, that is, referring to the likability of the manager.

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