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# **AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION INTO INFLUENCE TACTICS USED BY A NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT MANAGER**

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# **AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION INTO INFLUENCE TACTICS USED BY A NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT MANAGER**

## **ABSTRACT**

The strategic importance of NPD and the important role that marketers play in managing that process in Fast Moving Consumer Good (FMCG) organisations provides the impetus for this research paper. This exploratory in-depth case study examined the use of influence tactics used by a marketer managing a NPD project. The full range of soft influence tactics was used by the Project Manager, producing very similar findings on the widespread use of soft influence tactics reported in the existing literature. However, it would appear that the marketer managing the NPD process did not use the full range of hard influence tactics. A possible explanation for this is the corporate culture and wider Australian business culture within which the case study organisation operates in. The paper also identifies a range of future research directions stemming from this exploratory project.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

New product development (NPD) is a critical core business process because innovative new products are becoming the nexus of competition for many firms (Clark & Fujitimo 1991) and a potential source of competitive advantage (Cooper & Kleinschmidt 2000; Griffin 1997). For fast moving consumer goods (FMCG's) organisations in Australia NPD has assumed critical importance as they contend with the market power of a heavily concentrated grocery retail market and the commercial

reality that innovation provides the fuel for market growth in the current business environment (McIntryre 2002).

The theory is appealing, but what about the implementation issues? Within the Australian business context, very little is known about the activities undertaken by marketers to link the requirements of the market with the innovative capabilities of the firm. More specifically, very little is known about the role and influence of marketers in managing the NPD process and the contextual factors that enable them to manage that process (Workman 1993). While the role and influence of marketers is under researched, marketers do play an important role in managing NPD Projects in organisations producing consumer goods (Booz, Allen & Hamilton 2004; Workman & Webb 1999). This paper explores how marketers influence other members of NPD project teams by synthesising the relevant literature and then presenting the results of an exploratory research project examining the influence tactics used by marketers in managing a NPD project.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

New products in many industries are becoming the nexus of competition (Clark & Fujitimo 1991) and are vital to the long-term success and prosperity of the modern organisation (Cooper & Kleinschmidt 2000). NPD as business strategy is important because of its overall contribution to the organisation's performance at several levels. Successful new products can account for a high percentage of an organisation's sales and profits; approximate 28.3% in the U.S (Adams 2004: 4).and up to 27.2% in Australia (Kyriazis 2002). It is widely acknowledged in academia and the business community that the ability to develop and launch new products successful products in the marketplace is crucial to a firm's competitive advantage (Brown & Eisenhardt 1995; Cooper & Kleinschmidt 2000; Griffin 1997; Jeffrey, Michael & Shin 2003). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence in the popular press regularly supports the importance of NPD (Lloyd 2005; Plaskitt 2004).

In addition to the strategic significance of NPD highlighted in the literature and popular press the complex nature of the NPD process also makes it a core business process worthy of study in this research project. Of all the factors contributing to the complexity of the NPD process, it is the use of cross-functional teams that is deemed the most significant in this research project. In an attempt to significantly reduce NPD cycle time from idea inception to launch and to improve NPD outcomes, organisations are increasingly using cross-functional teams in NPD implementation (Cooper, Edgett & Kleinschmidt 2004a; Griffin 1997; Henke, Krachenberg & Lyons 1993). In addition, empirical research supports the proposition that marketing's participation in the NPD process and its integration with other functional groups are among the most important factors affecting new product success (Li & Atuahene-Gima 1999; Souder 1988; Walker & Ruekert 1987). Interaction, information sharing and cross-fertilization of ideas among the diverse group of cross-functional team members are essential. However, problems arise when people with dissimilar orientations, experiences, interests and goals are called upon to interact, make decisions, and participate in a core business process such as NPD (Jassawalla & Sashittal 2000).

In Australia NPD in the FMCG industry sector has received significant attention from the mainstream business press including *Business Review Weekly* (McIntryre 2002), *Professional Marketing* (Plaskitt 2004) and *Marketing* (Varley 2005). The relative weak performance of NPD in FMCG (Lloyd 2005; McColl 2005; McIntryre 2002) and a realisation of the opportunities NPD represent (Plaskitt 2004) for the industry sector has fuelled the interest of business commentators, although a paucity of academic research exists.

Within the Australian FMCG sector the large grocery chains, especially Woolworths and Coles supermarkets, are moving to expand their private-label (often referred to as house brand) product range at the expense of proprietary branded consumer goods. Both Woolworths and Coles have announced plans to reduce their stocks of external brands to give more shelf space to their own private-label products. As part of the private-label expansion the retailers will be pursuing a multi-segment strategy including the budget conscious, the after-work convenience seeker and serious gourmet segments of the grocery market (B&T Weekly 2005). Product innovation is being cited as an antecedent to both survival and growth for those manufacturers that do not supply private-label products for the grocery chain outlets (Lambaart 2005; Lloyd 2005). In an attempt to maintain and build their brand integrity leading FMCG organisations are refocussing on NPD as a business process to protect their brand dominance and market share, but it is a particularly risky endeavour in this industry sector (Lloyd 2005) and it is an accepted industry rule that 70% of new products introduced onto Australian grocery shelves fail within two years of introduction (McIntryre 2002). Given the importance of NPD in the Australian FMCG sector, the role of the NPD project manager, often performed by marketers, takes on heightened importance.

Beyond performing functional activities, evidence suggests that marketers often perform a project management role in NPD in consumer goods firms (Lloyd 2005; Workman 1993a, 1993b). The elevated role of marketers in general in consumer goods firms is supported in a report on the relevance of Chief Marketing Officers by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) and Booz, Allen and Hamilton where it was reported that 'in industries like consumer packaged goods, marketing rules the roost' (Booz, Allen and Hamilton 2004: 6). In FMCG organizations, marketers are often charged with the responsibility of managing the NPD Project (Varley 2005). This requires identifying and managing internal functional/departmental relationships (Srivastava, Shervani & Fahey 1999).

The marketing literature has provided adequate coverage of the functional marketing tasks, however the more complex and difficult role requiring the marketers to manage internal functional/departmental relationships has received limited academic attention. Given the reported loss of role and influence of marketers (Brown 2005; Kerin 2005; Piercy 1998) and given that cross-functional NPD teams are characterized by complexity, conflict, political factionalism, and problems associated with the different 'thought worlds' of project team participants (Atuahene-Gima & Li 2000), it would not be surprising to learn that marketers often struggle to influence other members in the NPD project team.

Most prior research on the role of marketing has focused on its participation (Gupta, Raj & Wilemon 1985, 1986; McQuiston & Dickson 1991). Participation is conceptualized as the amount of information shared between marketing and other participants in the NPD process and measured by the total amount of written or verbal communication that marketing offers others for consideration in the NPD process (McQuiston & Dickson 1991). However, given the inherent difficulties involved with the differential 'thought worlds' and power bases of other NPD team participants, they may choose to ignore or defy the information provided by the marketer and this may dilute the input marketers have in the process (Li & Atuahene-Gima 1999). It has been suggested that influence is a more important construct to examine when studying marketing's role in NPD (Atuahene-Gima & Evangelista 2002; Li & Atuahene-Gima 1999). Influence is conceptualized as the extent to which information provided by marketing leads to change in the attitudes and behavior of the recipients (e.g., R&D, Manufacturing, Sales) in the NPD team' (Li & Atuahene-Gima 1999: 34).

Research based on data collected from 114 high-technology Chinese organizations suggests marketing's influence is related positively to new product market performance and timeliness of development (Li & Atuahene-Gima 1999). Table 3 includes a summary of the influence tactics used by marketers in the Atuahene-Gima & Li (2000) research project. The influence tactics studied were adapted from the work of Frazier and Summers (1984) because of their wide use in the marketing literature. In terms of tactic usage frequency, persistent pressure, information exchange and recommendation were the most frequently used tactics. Coalition formation and upward appeal tactics were used moderately with legalistic plea and request used least frequently. In terms of influence tactic efficacy, the results indicate that persistent pressure, information exchange, and coalition formation result in higher levels of marketing influence in the NPD process (Athuahene-Gima & Li 2000) which in turn lead to improvements in the performance of new products in the market and timeliness of development (Li & Atuahene-Gima 1999).

**Insert Table 1 here**

While the Athuahene-Gima & Li (2000) study provided an interesting insight into the influence construct, it is not clear if the constructs apply to marketers' influencing other NPD project team members in the Australian FMCG industry sector. This research project explores the relevance of the influence tactics used by Athuahene-Gima & Li (2000) in the context of the NPD Project under review – a move into a new and unfamiliar category in the FMCG industry in Australia.

## **METHOD**

While the case study research method has been criticised for being less codified than quantitative research methods, case study research can be carried out rigorously, resulting in a high degree of validity and reliability (Adams, Day & Dougherty 1998; Alam 2002). Thus, a systematic process was followed using a single in-depth case study approach, a purposive sampling procedure and multiple data collection methods (Alam 2002; Eisenhardt 1989; Perry 1998; Yin 1994). The case study organisation proved to be a unique and revelatory unit of analysis and consistent with Yin (1994), a decision was made to extend the study to a single in-depth case study that involved ten interviews<sup>1</sup> over a period of eighteen months and document analysis. Each interview lasted 90-120 minutes.

EXO<sup>2</sup> is part of a large foreign owned multinational corporation that manufactures and markets FMCGs across a range of product and market sectors. Within EXO its functional divisions include Marketing, R&D, Sales, Finance, Personnel, Commercial, Engineering and Production. Given the cross-functional nature of new product development and the widely reported (Souder 1977, 1980, 1988) antagonistic relationship between marketing and R&D, marketing and sales (Kotler 2004; Webster 1997) and marketing and manufacturing (Crittenden, Gardiner & Stam 1993) it was important the views of a cross-section of NPD team participants were gathered to evaluate the influence and role of marketers. Participant B, a career marketer, was recognised by Participants A, B, C, E, F, G and H as the person that had the most influence on the NPD Project and was the focus of the research project. During the interviews participants were asked a series of questions relating to the relevance of the Athuahene-Gima & Li (2000) influence tactics in describing the behaviour of the project manager.

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<sup>1</sup> Three of the seven respondents were interviewed a second time after the product failed.

<sup>2</sup> During the process of negotiating entrée with the case study organisation, the reassurance of complete non-disclosure and confidentiality was a critical factor. EXO is a fictitious name. All other details about the organisation and the NPD Project under review are real and took place as described.

## RESULTS

Table 2 summarises the findings of the questions relating to the use of influence tactics by the marketer managing the NPD process at EXO. The table indicates (by use of a dot point) the respondents that identified the Project Manager's use of the individual influence tactics. The functional background of each research participant is indicated in the brackets in Table 2.

**Insert Table 2 here**

### ***Information Exchange***

In relation to the first soft influence tactic under review, information exchange, the research respondents agreed the Project Manager provided general market information and discussions on general NPD issues without suggesting actions to the influence target. The influence target is the person the project manager is trying to influence. Most respondents recognised it as a tactic used by most marketers in their day-to-day dealings with colleagues beyond the NPD process. Two of the respondents suggested the information exchange tactic was reflective of the corporate culture. The following comment is illustrative of their views.

*We are fairly open here at EXO in terms of the sharing of knowledge to empower you (resp. C).*

In addition, R&D identified the information exchange tactic as an important step in improving relations at EXO between Marketing and R&D.

*This project here was much more about sharing of information on the current market place and then together we came up with a straight forward pathway....it certainly wasn't Marketing saying "this is the direction we are going, now go (resp. F)!"*

### ***Recommendations***

The recommendation influence tactic is used when the marketer uses reason, logic and rational persuasion to convince the influence target that following a specific course of action is likely to be beneficial to the NPD effort. The clever use of this particular tactic was identified by most of the team members as one of the great strengths of the Project Manager in the project reviewed. The following comments are reflective of the views of the team members:

*Here with this project you could challenge her and ask questions and get additional information if required.....with any concerns we had she was able to articulate the reasoning behind and justify them. We signed off pretty smartly (resp. F).*

*I think that is why she has got so much respect because there was no 'whiffle waffle', it was just very clear facts...(resp. A)*

In commenting on the Project Manager's use of a rational argument backed by a significant research effort, team members noted that this was a welcome relief from some of their previous experiences with marketers managing NPD Projects.

### ***Request***

In this case study, the request influence tactic referred to situations where the marketer managing the NPD Project asked other project team members to take suggested actions based on personal relationships. With the exception of one team member, all respondents acknowledged that this was a tactic used by the Project Manager. They agreed that the Project Manager was able to use the request influence tactic because she was well liked by the project team.

*Yes, I guess in any project if you have good rapport with the team members then it obviously brings out the best in both of you and she had that with the majority of the team members (resp. A).*

The respondents agreed that the request influence tactic was used at different stages of the project but was used most noticeably when the challenges with the trade and technical difficulties surfaced.

According to the Project Manager:

*Yes, in fact, I have used those personal relationships to sometimes circumvent or overcome some issues here ... (resp. B)*

### **Coalition formation**

In this case study, the use of the coalition formation influence tactic where the marketer builds alliances with co-workers and members from other departments to gain support for their viewpoint or demand on the influence target was emphatically confirmed by all respondents. A number of respondents cited the conflict with the Sales Team as an important precursor to the use of the coalition formation influence tactic.

*Yes, and that was really necessitated with all the resistance we were getting from the Sales team and so you can definitely say there was certainly an alliance formed with the whole manufacturing base here. It was not us against them; it was more about Sales saying "I don't care what your information is we're just not interested." And so I think all of us, led by the Project Manager, had certain views that we then brought to the table to try and convince Sales (resp. F).*

Other respondents confirmed the coalition formation tactic was widely used throughout the organisation.

*It's very much our culture here, and if you don't build those bridges early, it is a challenge (Resp. C).*

### **Legalistic plea**

The use of the hard influence tactic, legalistic plea, was not recognised by team members. The legalistic plea tactic involves the marketer citing organisational rules and regulations that require the influence target to perform a certain action. There was unanimous agreement that this influence tactic was not used by the Project Manager throughout the NPD Project under review and further,

that it is an influence tactic that is rarely used at the organisation. However, a number of team members commented that the Project Manager did call on the principles of the business and the 60-day challenge to influence team members.

*...we are not a very document or procedurally oriented company, so calling on rules, no. Calling on the principles of the business, yes ... they are pretty much accepted by everyone and most, if not all people use them as part of their day- to-day approach to things... (resp. D)*

*I don't know if that (the 60- day challenge) was communicated to the project team as a whole; I presume it was, but it was definitely used in the one-to-one interactions you had with the Project Manager. So for us working with our packaging, or graphic design studio here, again we have to influence the priorities of that group's workload and clearly it was communicated "hey you have four days to turn around the packaging in that ninety days. (Resp. A)"*

### **Upward appeal**

The upward appeal influence tactic involves the marketer appealing to superior or higher authority in the organisation to garner support for their viewpoint or demands on the influence target. While most respondents acknowledged that this influence tactic was used by the Project Manager in this case, they suggested it was only used because of the uniqueness and complexity of the project under review. In general, most Project Managers would only use this influence tactic as a last resort to motivate or direct the behaviour of the team member.

*Yes, and again at times particularly with this project because of the problems with Sales and the challenges with Engineering, just in terms of timing and delivery of equipment, and what that meant to the initial project deadlines etc. So there were times when she was obviously comfortable enough to talk with the senior people in each of the Divisions to get the sign-off accelerated (Resp. F).*

*Very few managers would choose to use that approach here at EXO but this project called for different tactic (Resp. G).*

### **Persistent pressure**

The persistent pressure tactic refers to the amount of effort, persistence and pressure that the Project Manager from Marketing brings to bear on the influence target to accept their viewpoint or demands. Most of the team members agreed that the Project Manager persistently exerted significant effort in trying to influence them to accept her viewpoints, but stopped short of suggesting they were pressured in any way. Again, respondents suggested that pressure wouldn't work within the constraints of EXO's corporate culture.

*In terms of pressure, she certainly tries to sign you on, but I wouldn't say there was any violent pressure. She tries to engage you rather than applying pressure.....that is probably why she has worked reasonably well because applying pressure is not the right tactic here (Resp. D).*

A team member observed that the amount of persistence required would depend on the resistance of individuals within the team.

*For me personally I don't think she applied pressure or expended effort at all; I think we were signed on to it pretty well. However, I could see that some other divisions were testing her persistence because of their attitude right from the beginning (Resp. F).*

In summary, the interviews with team members suggest the Project Manager used the full range of soft influence tactics, comprising information exchange, recommendations, request and coalition formation. However, the only hard influence tactic used by the Project Manager was upward appeal and this was employed in response to the unique situation of the NPD Project under review, that is, the urgency of the 60-day challenge, the technical and logistical challenges and the enormous market opportunity the project presented.

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This research project set out to explore the influence tactics used by marketers in managing a NPD Project to change the attitudes and behaviours of other team members? In the current study the full

range of soft influence tactics was used by the Project Manager, producing very similar findings on the widespread use of soft influence tactics reported in the existing literature. However, it would appear that the marketer managing the NPD process did not use the full range of hard influence tactics. A possible explanation for this is the corporate culture and wider Australian business culture within which EXO operates in. The Australian business culture and the corporate culture described by the respondents is built on egalitarianism and mutual respect and the use of the legalistic plea influence tactic is not in keeping with those ideals and ethos.

Another possible explanation is that the use of the hard influence tactics, such as legalistic plea and persistent pressure, may counteract the effectiveness of the more widely used soft influence tactics such as request and coalition formation. For example, it would be difficult for a Project Manager to effectively use the request influence tactic, where the marketer informs other team members to take suggested actions based on personal relationships, if that same Project Manager was also citing organisational rules and regulations to the influence target.

The current research project identified several areas that are worthy of further research. The research presents only the first step in the development of a theoretical understanding of how marketers influence others when managing the NPD process in the Australian FMCG industry sector. Further research across other contexts, including project type (new to the world and line extensions), functional background of the project manager, corporate culture settings, and even industry settings is encouraged to determine the extent of external validity or the degree to which the results of this research are appropriate under other market conditions.

The method used in this research was a single in-depth case study approach that facilitates the initiation and development of the theory building process. The subsequent use of other

methodologies such as multiple case studies and/or large scale quantitative surveys would be useful in testing and advancing the knowledge of the influence of marketers in managing the NPD process.

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**Table 1: Influence Tactics**

<b>Influence tactics</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Soft tactics</b>	
Information exchange	Marketing provides general market information and discussions on general NPD issues without suggesting specific actions to the influence target.
Recommendations	Marketing uses reason, logic and rational persuasion to convince the influence target that following a specific course of action is likely to be beneficial to the NPD effort.
Request	Marketing informs other members to take suggested actions based on personal relationships.
Coalition formation	Marketing builds alliances with co-workers and members from other departments to gain support for its viewpoint or demand on the influence target.
<b>Hard tactics</b>	
Legalistic plea	Marketing cites organisational rules and regulations that require the influence target to perform a certain action.
Upward appeal	Marketing appeals to superior or high authority in the organisation to support its viewpoint or demands on the influence target.
Persistent pressure	The amount of effort, persistence and pressure that marketing brings to bear on the influence target to accept its viewpoint or demands.

**Source:** Athuahene-Gima & Li (2000: 456)

**Table 2: Influence tactics used by the marketer managing the NPD Project at EXO**

	Resp. A (Mkt)	Resp. B (Mkt)	Resp. C (Sales)	Resp. D (Mkt)	Resp. E (Mkt)	Resp. F (R&D)	Resp. G (Prod)
<b>Soft Tactics</b>							
Information exchange	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Recommendations	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Request	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Coalition formation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Hard Tactics</b>							
Legalistic plea							
Upward appeal	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Persistent pressure							

**Source:** Research interviews