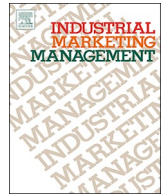




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Research paper

Value champions in business markets: Four role configurations

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ABSTRACT

Customer value management has become a key priority in business markets, but many firms struggle to implement it. While the prior literature has considered this primarily as sales responsibility, emerging research suggests that best practice firms employ dedicated value champions to implement customer value management. However, at present, we know little about the characteristics, and the tradeoffs between different value championing approaches in business markets. Based on a discovery-oriented field research and interviews with 59 managers in 11 firms, this study illustrates four alternative role configurations firms use to employ value champions, and unpacks the characteristics and implications of each approach. Collectively, this study advances industrial marketing theory by shedding light on an emergent and contemporary management practice, and offering practical insights into how firms can employ value champions in business markets.

1. Introduction

Customer value management has become an important topic in contemporary business markets (Eggert, Ulaga, Frow, & Payne, 2018; Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant, & Morgan, 2012). Industrial firms are increasingly aiming to provide high-value added service and solution offerings (e.g., Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, & Wilson, 2016; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011) and deploy different customer value-based strategies to understand, deliver and communicate value to customers (Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2012; Terho, Eggert, Ulaga, Haas, & Böhm, 2017). Yet, despite the mounting academic and practitioner interest, many firms still struggle to implement customer value management in practice (Töytäri, Rajala, & Alejandro, 2015; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). This is a critical issue, since customer value management is for many firms the primary, if not the only way, to differentiate and stay competitive in the highly commoditized B2B space (Ulaga, 2018; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Consequently, recent studies have called for more insights into how firms can manage value more formally (Liozu, 2017), and employ specialized customer value managers in B2B markets and buyer-seller relationships (Corsaro, 2019).

The current customer value literature and conventional practice have depicted customer value management mostly as sales responsibility (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos, & Sager, 2012; Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015), but recent studies indicate that industrial firms face major barriers and resistance when delegating value management to their sales force (Terho et al., 2017; Töytäri, Keränen, &

Rajala, 2017; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). In contrast, emerging research suggests that best practice firms in B2B markets, such as SKF, and SAP, tend to employ dedicated value specialists, expert teams, and organizational units, or more broadly, *organizational value champions* to facilitate the implementation of customer value management (e.g., Anderson, Kumar, & Narus, 2007; Johansson, Keränen, Hinterhuber, Liozu, & Andersson, 2015; Keränen & Jalkala, 2014). Yet, despite these important insights, understanding *how supplier firms can integrate customer value management into their organizational structure remains an important but poorly understood issue* (Eggert, Kleinaltenkamp, & Kashyap, 2019).

In organizational theory, organizational champions are influential individuals who actively drive change and are instrumental in facilitating the adoption and implementation of new organizational practices and strategies (Howell, Shea, & Higgins, 2005; Schon, 1963). While previous studies have examined the roles and potential benefits of organizational champions in several domains, including pricing (Liozu & Hinterhuber, 2013; Liozu, Hinterhuber, Perelli, & Boland, 2012) and innovation (Howell & Higgins, 1990; Kelley & Lee, 2010), they have considered champions mostly as informal, emergent and individual-level roles (Klerkx & Aarts, 2013). In contrast, only a few studies have considered the roles and potential benefits of more formal, stable, and team-based champions (c.f., Liozu & Hinterhuber, 2012). Consequently, the current literature provides only a *limited understanding of the characteristics and potential implications of alternative championing approaches*.

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Therefore, to address the limitations in the current literature, *the purpose of this study is to explore how firms employ value champions in business markets, and the potential advantages and disadvantages of different approaches.* We do this by analyzing the nature of customer value in contemporary business markets and the implications this has for managing value. Next, we consider the roles of organizational champions, and how these can be analyzed using organizational structures as a guiding framework. After highlighting the gaps and boundaries in the current knowledge, we generate empirical insights from discovery-oriented field research and interviews with 59 managers from 11 industrial firms in business markets.

This study contributes to the customer value and organizational championing literature by illustrating how firms in business markets can employ value champions in four different role configurations (individual or organizational and permanent or temporary), and revealing the characteristics and trade-offs between different championing approaches. This advances industrial marketing theory by demonstrating the opportunities and challenges that value championing offers for customer value management, and responding to several previous calls that have underlined the need for more insights into how firms can implement customer value management (e.g., Terho et al., 2012; 2017; Corsaro, 2019; Eggert et al., 2019). For managers, this study offers important and actionable insights on how to deploy and leverage value champions in business markets.

2. Literature review and conceptual background

2.1. Why customer value is complex and difficult to manage in B2B markets

Customer value has become one of the most important, yet complex and contested issues in contemporary B2B marketing research (Eggert et al., 2018; Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). For example, the current literature is increasingly in agreement that since customer value is a subjective and phenomenological perception of benefits and costs (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) that are realized in-use (Grönroos & Voima, 2013) and in-context (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011), it is

challenging to understand and manage (Pinnington, Meehan, & Scanlon, 2016; Töytäri et al., 2015). Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that misunderstood and mismanaged value perceptions can lead to severe outcomes and missed opportunities (e.g., Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Prior & Marcos-Cuevas, 2016). This complexity is further accentuated in modern B2B markets, where services and solutions are becoming increasingly complex and value-intensive (Friend & Malshe, 2016; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011), and the potential value-in-use is experienced subjectively across multiple groups of diverse stakeholders (Macdonald et al., 2016; Pinnington et al., 2016; Prior, Keränen, & Koskela, 2019).

Typically, both conventional wisdom and B2B marketing studies have assumed that the responsibility of “managing” value belongs to the sales function (Anderson et al., 2007; Blocker et al., 2012; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015), and centers on understanding, quantifying, and communicating value (Hinterhuber, 2017; Terho et al., 2012). Yet, despite a host of studies that have explored the role of sales in managing value (e.g., Töytäri et al., 2011; Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012; Terho et al., 2017), the recent research indicates that in practice, sales forces often struggle to understand and communicate value (Töytäri et al., 2017; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). Key reasons for this seem to be increasingly complex customer needs, co-creation processes, and offering characteristics in the contemporary B2B environment, which tend to require specialist skills and knowledge (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012) as well as unique, value-related resources and competences (Terho et al., 2017; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). However, these often go beyond the typical resources and capabilities of sales staff (Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014), and hence scholars have voiced the need to consider new approaches to customer value management that would better take these heightened requirements into account (Keränen & Jalkala, 2014; Macdonald et al., 2016). For example, recent studies have pointed out the need to develop specialized roles for managers who would be responsible for championing, implementing and managing all the value processes in their organizations in a strategic fashion (Corsaro, 2019; Liozu, 2016, 2017).

Table 1

Overview of the key championing studies in related literature streams.

Study	Focus	Champions as	Key findings	Literature
Schon (1963)	Role of champions in radical innovation	Individuals	Champions are critical to innovation success in large firms	Innovation
Chakrabarti (1974)	Role of champions in product innovation	Individuals	Champions adopt many roles during collective decision-making processes	Innovation
Howell and Higgins (1990)	What makes champions successful?	Individuals	Identifies the key characteristics of champions and three distinct championing processes	Innovation
Markham (1998)	How do champions influence other people?	Individuals	Champions influence other people through their relationships, but not through influence tactics	Innovation
Markham and Griffin (1998)	How do champions influence NPD performance?	Individuals	Champions have an indirect effect on firm performance	Innovation
Howell et al. (2005)	Championing behaviors	Individuals	Develops a construct for championing behavior	Innovation
Lichtenthaler and Ernst (2009)	Roles of champions in external innovation	Individuals	Champions influence external knowledge exploitation and commercialization	Innovation
Gattiker and Carter (2010)	How do project champions gain organizational commitment?	Individuals	Champions gain organizational commitment by using three influence tactics (inspirational appeals, consultation, rational persuasion)	Operations Management
Kelley and Lee (2010)	Project champion empowerment	Individuals	Empowerment depends on project innovativeness and strategic relatedness	Innovation
Liozu et al. (2012)	How to implement value-based pricing?	Individuals	Value-based pricing requires purposeful championing	Pricing
Klerkx and Aarts (2013)	How do multiple champions interact in innovation networks?	Individuals	Champions interact in four different roles (power, expert, process, network champion), which complement or conflict with each other	Innovation
Liozu and Hinterhuber (2013)	How does CEO championing influence pricing capabilities and performance?	Individuals	CEO championing behaviors influence pricing capabilities, collective mindfulness and decision-making rationality	Pricing
Liozu, Hinterhuber, and Somers (2014)	How does organizational design influence pricing capabilities and performance?	Individuals	Championing behaviors are antecedent to pricing capabilities and increase firm performance	Pricing
Kokoulina, Ermolaeva, Patala, and Ritala (2019)	Roles of champions in industrial symbiosis	Individuals	Identifies four roles (influence & power, networking & collaborating, technology & expertise, institutional) and three domains (organizational, network, institutional) in championing	Industrial symbiosis

2.2. Value champions as emerging approach to manage value in business markets

In organizational theory, organizational champions refer to the key individuals within organizations, who actively and persuasively advocate, promote and facilitate new ideas, specific change initiatives, and the adoption of new organizational practices (Chakrabarti, 1974; Schon, 1963). Champions are usually transformational leaders and influential change agents (Nadler & Nadler, 1997), who possess specialist skills and knowledge, and can educate, empower and energize other stakeholders (Markham, 1998; Thompson, 2009). Their role in driving new change initiatives is often deemed instrumental, because they can motivate and mobilize organizational resources to take action (Howell et al., 2005). For instance, when organizations introduce new change initiatives, they often need the support of organizational champions who can successfully introduce and instill new organizational practices into the firm's DNA and realm of collective behavior (Liozu et al., 2012). Table 1 provides an overview of the key championing studies in the current literature.

While most of the extant championing studies have been conducted in the innovation management context (see Table 1), recent studies have begun to explore championing efforts in other areas as well. For example, the emerging body of research in pricing has explored the effects of championing on pricing capabilities and firm performance (Liozu et al., 2014; Liozu & Hinterhuber, 2013), and demonstrated that organizational champions play a key role in implementing value-based pricing (Liozu et al., 2012). Similarly, anecdotal evidence and managerial literature in B2B marketing indicate that some of the best practice firms in business markets tend to employ specially trained salespeople or more strategic, C-level senior managers as dedicated value champions, who are responsible for developing, implementing, and communicating different value management initiatives (Anderson et al., 2007; Liozu, 2016). Such individuals often carry titles such as “value merchants”, “certified value sellers”, or “Chief Value Officers” to highlight their specialized focus and responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2007).

However, this far most of the previous studies have considered champions primarily as individual-level roles (see Table 1). Only few studies in the management and pricing domains, that address championing mostly indirectly or tangentially, indicate that value champions can also be employed at organizational level, as expert teams or separate organizational functions (c.f., Liozu et al., 2012; Keränen & Jalkala, 2014; Johansson et al., 2015). While this suggest that firms can employ value champions in a variety of ways, it does not reveal the specific characteristics or trade-offs between different championing approaches.

2.3. Organizational structures as a framework for customer value management

Organizational theories have a rich history in considering different ways how firms can organize their resources and channel their activities towards specific goals (Chia, 1997). Typically, this literature analyzes organizational action through organizational structures, which can be understood as the “ways in which [the organization] divides its labor into distinct tasks and then achieves coordination among them”

(Mintzberg, 1979, p. 2). Organizational structures can be either stable and permanent, or more emergent and temporary (Child & McGrath, 2001; Ilinitch, D'Aveni, & Lewin, 1996), and they determine the organization's ability to access, share and leverage accumulated knowledge, skills and expertise for decision-making (Galbraith, 1974; Nonaka, 1994). Different organizational structures are usually considered in terms of specialization, standardization, formalization and centralization (see Table 2), which guide resource allocation and knowledge flows (Hage & Aiken, 1967; Mintzberg, 1979; Pugh et al., 1963).

As contemporary B2B space has become more complex and competitive, scholars in different fields have noted the need for increased specialization and begun to seek new organizational structures that could help better deploy and leverage accumulated resources and expertise. For example, recent studies in pricing (Burkert, Ivens, Henneberg, & Schradi, 2017; Liozu et al., 2014; Liozu & Ecker, 2012), new product/service development (Blindenbach-Driessen & Ende, 2014; Jaakkola & Hallin, 2018) and solution research (Hakanen, 2014) have demonstrated how separate, centralized, and formalized specialist units can be leveraged and lead to beneficial outcomes in these contexts. However, despite these insights, only a few studies have considered alternative organizational structures or specialized organizational arrangements for customer value management in B2B markets. For example, Keränen and Jalkala (2014) identify a specialization strategy for customer value assessment as one possibility, but do not explore in detail the different ways it can be implemented, or the characteristics or consequences of different alternatives thereof.

3. Methodology

Since the aim of this study was to explore how firms employ value champions in business markets, and what the trade-offs are between different approaches, we employed a qualitative research strategy, which is especially suitable when the objective is to seek answers to “what”, and “how” questions (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2014). Since value championing is an emerging management practice with limited prior research (Anderson et al., 2007), we adopted a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use research approach (Zaltman, LeMasters, & Heffring, 1982), and focused on generating theoretical insights from field observations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Overall, our research approach is in line with the broader marketing and management literature, which considers exploratory and qualitative research methods especially suited to uncovering new empirical insights and building theory in emerging or unexplored research areas (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

3.1. Data collection

For our empirical foundation, we drew on a large set of qualitative interviews, participant observation and secondary data collected during two large research projects in Finland between 2011 and 2016. Both projects focused on industrial firms' transition towards customer value-based management and addressed specific aspects of adopting and implementing different value-based business strategies and tactical

Table 2
Key dimensions of organizational structures (adapted from Jaakkola & Hallin, 2018).

Dimension	Description	Literature
Specialization	The extent that individuals, teams, or functions are specialized in performing specific activities and tasks.	Pugh et al. (1963); Daugherty, Chen, and Ferrin (2011).
Standardization	The extent that work activities and practices are performed in pre-described and uniform manner each time they are executed, and have clear definitions, boundaries, and expected outcomes.	Pugh et al. (1963); Maleyeff (2006).
Formalization	The extent that organizational activities, practices, rules and procedures are written down, codified or formally documented.	Pugh et al. (1963); Daugherty et al. (2011).
Centralization	The extent of autonomy, control, and ownership individuals have, and approval and supervision they need over their own work, including activities, practices, goals, and outcomes.	Pugh et al. (1963); Zmud (1982).

value initiatives. With the aim of recruiting best practice exemplars and firms that are particularly revelatory in terms of the focal phenomenon, we employed theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and interviewed supplier firms that: 1) were currently adopting (four firms) or had implemented (seven firms) customer value management strategies and practices; 2) operated in a variety of business-to-business industries to ensure rich information; and 3) represented industry leaders in their respective markets to explore particularly successful practices.

During the study, we conducted in-depth interviews with 59 senior managers in 11 industrial firms (see Table 3). The firms were different in size, and operated globally in several industries, ranging from commodities (e.g., chemicals, paper) to highly complex and customized solutions (e.g., IT and automation solutions) and from products (e.g., paper machines, bearings) to more intangible and knowledge-intensive services (e.g., consulting and technology services). As such, the empirical data provides a rich picture of different business contexts and enables comparisons across different firms and industries, thus increasing the generalizability of the findings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). To avoid single-respondent bias and increase exposure to multiple perspectives, we interviewed several managers within each firm. To identify and recruit information-rich individuals, we used key informant protocol (Kumar, Stern, & Anderson, 1993), and focused on senior-level decision makers. The average experience of all participants was over 17 years, indicating substantial management and industrial experience. Overall, the breadth and depth of the sample in this study is well above similar discovery-oriented studies in business markets (Terho et al., 2012; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011), as well as the recommended sample sizes for exploratory research (McCracken, 1988).

All the interviews followed a broad thematic guide, which was informed by the extant literature, and focused on discovering (i) how value management was conducted and organized in different firms, and (ii) the typical benefits and challenges the firms experienced when enacting different value management approaches. As the early findings indicated that many of the firms appeared to employ dedicated value champions in various forms, we drew insights from the organizational championing literature, and subsequently refined the interview guide to delve deeper into specific practices and implications of value championing. We used semi-structured interview format and open-ended questions, which facilitated the emergence and subsequent probing of naturally occurring data (Creswell, 2012). The interviews lasted 73 min on average, were

audiotaped and subsequently transcribed, resulting in 920 pages of text.

In addition to the interview data, the participating firms granted access to internal documents relating to customer value management, often sensitive and confidential in nature. These included process frameworks, strategic plans, documented business cases, project diaries and training material. In line with exploratory research strategy (Yin, 2014), this secondary data was primarily used to enrich our contextual understanding, complement the interview data, and verify the emerging findings. In total, we received 450 pages of internal documentation, resulting in 1370 pages of primary and secondary material for data analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

To analyze our data, we used inductive grounded theory coding process, which is especially suitable for exploratory, theory-building research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the first stage, we employed open coding and within-case analyses to seek evidence on how each firm conducted customer value management. As the coding and analysis progressed, it became evident that many of the firms employed dedicated value champions to facilitate the implementation and enactment of customer value management. At this stage, we identified at least 13 different titles (see Table 4) and 144 codable moments that described the activities, practices and/or goals that these dedicated value champions were responsible. The activities and practices that emerged during the analysis were labelled with in-vivo codes, describing concepts based on the actual language employed by the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Given the large volume of data, we employed NVivo11 software to facilitate early conceptualizations and subsequent theory construction (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

In the second stage, we employed axial coding and between case-analyses and compared the identified roles and practices according to their properties and dimensions. This led to the emergence of the preliminary categories that describe the nature of the different role configurations (individual/organizational, temporal/permanent) that the value champions seemed to adopt in the participating firms (see Table 4). As the categories emerged, we used focused coding to analyze and compare their structural characteristics, as well as the potential advantages and disadvantages interviewees associated with different configurations. As the analysis proceeded, we revisited the data in light of the emerging insights, and elaborated our interpretations to match

Table 3
Profiles of the firms and the titles of the respondents in the study.

Firm (n = 11)	Industry	Turnover (€M) Employees	Participants (n = 59)
Alpha	Metallurgical technology	1300	Product Manager; Sales Manager; Development Manager; Head of Service Center; Sales Director; Application Engineer;
Beta	Chemical technology	3800 2200 5000	Commercial Product Manager; Director of Automation; VP of Sales; Sales Development Coordinator Sales Manager; VP of Sales; Business Development Manager; Commercialization Manager; Key Account Manager 1; Marketing Manager 1; Senior Marketing Manager; Marketing Manager 2; Key Account Manager 2; Marketing Manager 3; Marketing Manager 4; Senior Business Development Manager,
Gamma	Paper and fiber technology	6600 30,000	Planning Manager; Senior Paper Technology Manager; Marketing Service Manager; General Manager; Product Marketing Manager; VP of Sales
Delta	Industrial bearings	7700 14,600	Sales Executive; Managing Director
Epsilon	Industrial equipment (e.g., hydraulics)	12,000 60,000	Customer Service Manager; Key Account Manager; Sales Manager
Zeta	Enterprise software	14,200 55,700	Service Sales Manager; Head of Presales and Solutions; Senior Principal of Value Engineering
Eta	Management consulting and technology services	23,200 249,000	Senior Manager; Sales Director; Senior Director; Executive Director
Theta	Computer hardware and enterprise software	29,000 118,000	Global Client Advisor; Global Insight Program Director
Iota	Power and automation technology	31,300 145,000	Sales Director; VP of Business Development; Business Unit Director; Sales & Marketing Director
Kappa	Business and IT solutions	83,700 433,300	Nordic Region Leader; Industrial Sector Manager; Business Unit Executive; Country Sales Leader
Lambda	Telecommunications	1330 3000	Senior Sales Executive; Head of Pricing; Value Architect 1; Value Architect 2; Senior Business Manager; Head of Business Architecture; Business Architect; VP of Offering; Sales Director

Table 4
Overview of the roles and titles related value champions evident in the data.

Nature of the role	Examples of titles that emerged from the data	Employed by	Indicative quotes
Permanent & organizational	Value engineering –unit Value analyst team Value assessment team [name] program	Zeta	“We have a few organizations who are solely dedicated to value assessment. First, we have our own business consulting unit who does it for a fee with the customers. But then we also have this other organization ... value engineering. And this is a free service for customers. Those guys do nothing else but the business cases.” (Head of Presales and Solutions, Enterprise software supplier)
		Eta	
		Theta	
Permanent & individual	Value Champion, Global Value Manager, Value Architect, Value Analyst, Value Specialist, Value-based deal expert	Delta	“We have value specialists who are specialized in value assessment. They might specialize in certain products ... or certain business areas ... and when this is your primary job, you might do 80 business cases per year.” (Global Client Advisor, Computer hardware and enterprise software supplier)
		Epsilon	
		Eta	
		Theta	
		Kappa	
Temporary & organizational	Virtual value team Task force	Lambda	“We have this kind of unofficial, virtual value team ... people with experience, who understand both the technology and business aspects, and are able to identify the customer's pain points ... But they do that on top of their primary jobs.” (Commercial Product Manager, Metallurgical Technology supplier)
		Alpha	
		Iota	
Temporary & individual	Value specialists Value ambassador	Alpha	“We have a global value manager, or value champion ... But that is too heavy a role for local organizations, like us. So, we are focused on documenting value and we have this kind of super-user, who can help and support others in the value calculations... It's one role, but in a small organization, people have to wear two hats”. (Managing Director, Industrial bearings supplier)
		Beta	
		Delta	

the observed managerial practices. We continued this iterative sequence until we reached theoretical saturation and no new insights emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Finally, in the third stage, we employed selective coding and integrated the emerging categories into an overall framework (see Fig. 1 in Section 5).

To increase the trustworthiness, analytical rigor and validity of the study and the interpretations of the emerging findings, we employed several well-established criteria for qualitative field research (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, we ensured credibility and confirmability by employing several forms of triangulation (data; researcher; theory), member checks and prolonged engagement in the field. Second, we ensured transferability and dependability by employing theoretical sampling, studying firms in a wide range of industries, and presenting direct quotes from the data. Third, we improved accuracy, relevancy and applicability by presenting emerging findings to managerial audiences in several workshops, seminars and steering group meetings to receive feedback and validation during the study.

4. Findings: need for value champions in industrial firms

Based on the initial analysis, it seems that all of the interviewed firms, with the exception of Gamma,¹ employed specific customer value managers, specially assembled value teams and organizational value units, or in other words, dedicated value champions to facilitate the implementation of customer value management. Several firms explained that these value champions were a “critical” or “strategic” resource and a key differentiator in the highly commoditized B2B markets.

The diversity of emergent and latent customer needs and the corresponding increase in the variety of products and services offered as well as in the complexity and customization of value propositions were most frequently indicated as the key drivers that increased the need for dedicated value champions. All the interviewed firms consistently explained that understanding, managing and communicating all these drivers was usually beyond both the responsibilities and capabilities of their sales force (c.f., Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). The following quotes demonstrate this overall sentiment:

“When you approach middle and large customers, they have diverse needs

and the range of potential solutions is so wide that you can't just assume the average sales guy can sufficiently manage all that ... However, with larger customers the need is usually customer-specific and they often expect customization and a lot of services as well. It becomes so complex that you need a specialist, who is able to tell you: This is the solution you need, these are the benefits you are going to get and this is what it's going to cost you.” (Head of Pricing, telecommunications supplier).

“Value propositions should always be measured and assessed... But in our business, sales can't do it ... In this area you need a lot of engineering skills... but those guys can't do the business cases ... sometimes they even consider that an inconvenience... You need professionals, who can speak the customer's language, and translate technical jargon into resonating customer benefits.” (VP Business development, power and automation technology supplier).

4.1. The roles of dedicated value champions

As our analysis progressed, several different roles and operational titles related to value champions emerged from the data, indicating that such roles exist in various configurations, and can range from individual assignments to broader organizational teams or functions, and from temporary, or even ad-hoc roles to permanent positions (see Table 4).

According to the data, four of the companies employed value champions in two different role configurations simultaneously, while six firms employed only one primary configuration. The use of two configurations was usually related to using a more structured role globally (either a permanent team or permanent individuals), and then a less structured variation of this role configuration locally (either permanent individuals or temporary individuals). In the following sections, we analyze the specific roles, their structural characteristics and potential implications in more detail.

4.2. Permanent and organizational roles: Value engineering unit and value analyst teams

In three of the companies, value champions were employed in permanent and organizational roles, ranging from value engineering units to value assessment and value analyst teams. These units and teams typically involved a high degree of centralization, as they had been purposefully formed to serve a strategic and broader, organizational level purpose. The individuals assigned to these roles were

¹ Even Gamma placed a high priority on customer value management, but were still in the early phases of their transformation and had just started employing specific customer reference managers, responsible for documenting and communicating the delivered customer value.

usually recruited and trained to perform specific value-related tasks and activities in a full-time capacity. Several interviewees explained that having centralized organizational units and teams that were specialized in value management *allowed them to develop value-related tools and processes that could be deployed more broadly across the organization*, for example, to support sales, train and educate other personnel or consult with customers and other stakeholders.

“It’s our Value Engineering’s [unit] role to do the training, and develop the value tools and make sure the other people in the organization understand and know how to use them ... and we help them use them and position them as services to customers, too.” (Senior Principal of Value Engineering, Enterprise software supplier).

A key feature of this setup was the *systematic collection and codification of accumulated knowledge*, enabled by a high degree of formalization. Many interviewees pointed out that having dedicated resources and systematic processes to *analyze customer cases and document realized value outcomes* allowed them to *develop large case and reference databases very efficiently*, and transfer the key insights and lessons learned from individual projects into organizational practices and routines.

“We have value specialists who are specialized in value assessment. They might specialize in certain products ... or certain business areas ... and when this is your primary job, you might do 80 business cases per year. And if you have a larger organization, for this, you will get a benchmark database quite quickly. You become very efficient in this; it is like an industrialized process. And when your organization does hundreds of them in a year, it becomes a routine.” (Global Client Advisor, Computer hardware and enterprise software supplier).

All of the three firms that employed permanent and organizational value champions had standardized their value practices to a level where they could *provide different value analyses as scalable and billable services to customers and internal stakeholders*. For example, both enterprise software suppliers had developed a range of different value analyses for their service portfolio, and one of them sold specific value training modules for customers too. Internally, these value units operated as “in-house consultants”, and usually charged customer and sales teams for their services and expertise.

“We have a value engineering unit that provides different value analysis and TCO services that go much deeper than the regular software sales process. But if the customer wants those, we sell them as services, and customers have to pay for them.” (Service Sales Manager, Enterprise software supplier).

“The team that does these value analyses... It has a fixed price that our customer team pays to get the results. It’s like internal consulting, they explain the findings and logic behind them and then the account team takes that to the dialog with the customer.” (Senior Manager, Management consulting and technology services supplier).

However, the data also indicates that establishing and maintaining a *dedicated organizational unit for value management required substantial investments in expertise and human resources*, which usually involved trade-offs with other key activities and functions. In addition, many interviewees underlined that a large sales volume or delivering high-value offerings, such as knowledge intensive consulting services or complex IT and software solutions were necessary conditions for dedicated value units to become an economically viable approach.

“The largest investment is those people... you need to think about it, do you need ten guys for value assessment, building business cases, developing those tools and databases, or ten guys who do direct sales. Which gives you a better return? ... Value assessment is important to us, but if you think about it, a firm needs to have very high volumes before it [a dedicated unit] makes sense.” (Global Client Advisor, Computer hardware and enterprise software supplier).

“We sell expensive professional services ... and the margins need to be high. Unless it shows in the bottom line, it doesn’t make sense to employ dedicated value teams.” (Executive Director, Management consulting and technology services supplier).

Furthermore, some interviewees also noted that *too much reliance on value champions can hamper salespeople’s value selling skill acquisition*, as they can become too accustomed to relying on value specialists in difficult customer cases, instead of learning how to quantify and communicate value themselves.

“If you have this kind of professional value specialists’ unit that’s available on demand, the sales guys might start to think that they can always lean on them with difficult customers cases, or feel they can’t be credible without those professionals ... And then it does not get ingrained in their own DNA” (Senior Principal of Value Engineering, Enterprise software supplier).

Table 5 summarizes the key characteristics and potential implications of permanent and organizational value champions.

4.3. Permanent and individual roles: Value managers and value architects

Six companies employed value champions in permanent and individual roles. These ranged from global value champions and value

Table 5
Overview of the characteristics and implications of permanent and organizational value champions.

Key characteristics	Potential advantages and disadvantages	Indicative quotes
Permanent and highly centralized organizational unit that serves broader organizational interests and strategic goals	Enables the development of value tools and processes for broader organizational use	<i>“I work in our Value Engineering team ... We do sales support, customer value assessment, business cases and roadmaps ... We support sales internally, and externally, we help the customer understand, assess and verify the benefits they get from our solutions.” (Senior Principal of Value Engineering, Enterprise software supplier)</i>
High degree of formalized activities	Enables systematic collection and documentation of accumulated, value related knowledge	<i>“In our value engineering team, the goal is to do a few business transformation studies per year. They are like documented reference stories. We have a case study, the customer’s goals, what they did, what they got and what the concrete benefits were ... And after a while, we can go back there and see whether they got them ... Sales does not usually have time to do this.” (Senior Principal of Value Engineering, Enterprise software supplier)</i>
High degree of standardized activities	Enables providing value analyses as standardized services	<i>“Our Value Engineering unit organizes these Value Academies and gives customers tools and access to benchmarking data.” (Head of Presales and Solutions, Enterprise software supplier)</i> <i>“We have a few unique services in our value engineering ... we can leverage our accumulated knowledge and industry data, and do benchmark analyses.” (Senior Principal of Value Engineering, Enterprise software supplier)</i>
High resource requirements	Requires investments in expertise and large volumes of high-value sales Reliance on value specialists may hamper salespeople’s value selling skill acquisition	<i>“We have a team that does only value analyses and reports... but it requires a constant stream of high-value projects and paying customers to make it a viable approach.” (Senior Manager, Management consulting and technology services supplier)</i> <i>“Sometimes sales guys might assume it’s the value specialists’ responsibility to do the value calculations and verifications, and they just tick the boxes.” (Global Client Advisor, Computer hardware and enterprise software supplier)</i>

managers to local value architects and value analysts who were usually focused on *promoting the benefits of value management and/or analyzing selected, high-value customer cases*. Permanent and individual value champion roles exhibited a degree of concentrated centralization, as they involved only a few, often a one key person in global organizations. For example, the industrial bearings supplier had only one permanent Value Manager globally, while the Management consulting supplier had one Value Champion in each Nordic country, and the telecommunications supplier had two Value Architects in Finland.

“We have a few specific value-based deal experts and value champions, in the Nordics for example, one for each country, who is dedicated to this kind of value-based deals and deliveries. His role is to support, figure out different ways to do it, evaluate and assess the outcomes, and then spread it to the broader organization.” (Executive Director, Management consulting and technology services supplier).

Several interviewees indicated that the key role of individual value champions was usually to *educate and encourage both internal and external stakeholders* to adopt value-oriented approaches in their business practices. While these value champions provided inputs and insights to develop value tools in several companies, their primary role was often to provide “value training” or “value coaching” to different stakeholders, and promote the benefits of value-based approaches at different customer and industry events.

“He [global value manager] trains our sales guys, dealer network and works at the customer interface as well. He’s involved in internalizing the mindset ...He organizes value seminars and educates the top management of our most important large customers, in training, discussions, and workshops ... And globally, he educates industrial buyers at various purchasing and procurement seminars, changing mindsets to value orientation and how to buy value.” (Managing Director, Industrial bearings supplier).

“At corporate level, we have a few value champions in Europe, but for example in Finland, we have none. And they do only training.” (Senior Manager, Industrial Equipment supplier).

Some interviewees pointed out that due to the limited number of individual value champions, *allocating their time and expertise between different projects was sometimes challenging*. For example, in the Telecommunications firm, the two value architects had to navigate between being deeply embedded in specific customer cases and

developing organization-wide value training events, while in the Management Consulting firm, value architects were often a desired resource for several customer teams and projects at the same time.

“Value architects do short consultations with different customer teams. They are not attached to specific customers ... They work as change agents; they challenge the customer teams, could you do it like this instead, and train them. These types are really valuable as a part of our team, and everybody wants to use them ... so you need to prioritize bigger, high-value projects or customer cases.” (Senior Manager, Management consulting and technology services supplier).

In addition, because of the limited number of individual value champions, organizations often became *dependent on a few key value experts*. This manifested usually as the risk of losing critical expertise if individuals changed jobs, or of one individual having an overly strong influence on the kinds of value management approach promoted in organizations. For example, a few interviewees noted that sometimes the value champion's personal style or professional background colored their training approach, which could impair the adoption of value management within local sales organizations.

“He [global value manager] creates the basis for understanding why value is important, advocates it, and shares successful examples. His role is to wake people up, nurture the value culture and he embodies that spirit like an American showman... but for our local salespeople, it might sometimes be difficult to apply those same principles. That same style and approach does not necessarily work in our culture or with our customers.” (Sales Executive, Industrial bearings supplier).

“He [value analyst] is very good, but since he has a technical background, he’s very much a numbers’ guy... and sometimes our sales need a softer touch.” (Nordic Region Leader, IT and Business Solutions suppliers).

Table 6 summarizes the key characteristics and potential implications of permanent and individual value champions.

4.4. Temporary and organizational roles: Ad-hoc value project teams

Two of the interviewed firms employed value champions in temporary and organizational roles via specific project teams, which were usually assembled on an ad-hoc basis, often to *support sales when a high-value business case was identified or needed troubleshooting*. Such teams

Table 6
Overview of the characteristics and implications of permanent and individual value champions.

Key characteristics	Potential advantages and disadvantages	Indicative quotes
Concentrated centralization of few permanent key individuals with value-related expertise and knowledge	Promotes value management within the organization	<i>“We have a few dedicated value managers, who take on important cases ... they act as examples and ambassadors and motivate other people to do this as well.” (Sales Executive, Industrial bearings supplier)</i>
	Allows the analysis and quantification of selected, high value customer cases and development projects	<i>“We have two value architects who try to quantify high-value customer cases” (Business development manager, Telecommunications supplier)</i>
	Educates and encourages internal and external stakeholders	<i>“We have a global value manager or champion, who not only motivates people internally, but also develops the tool and concept and works externally with stakeholders.” (Managing Director, Industrial bearings supplier).</i> <i>“We try to train and teach sales reps, justify arguments and point out the differences between competitors’ products.” (Value Architect 2, Telecommunications supplier)</i>
Moderate degree of formalization and standardization	Allocating expert resources to different projects sometimes challenging	<i>“We have only two value architects, so we have to be mindful, and choose carefully how we use them.” (Head of Pricing Telecommunications supplier)</i>
	Person dependency; risk of losing expertise and personal influence to value management practices	<i>“He [Global value manager] is the only one who knows these things like his own pockets... He’s a critical resource for us.” (Sales Executive, Industrial bearings supplier)</i> <i>“We have a global value champion who trains our sales people across Europe... but you need really to understand what’s valuable to your own customer. What works with global mining equipment does not necessarily work with Finnish forest equipment.” (Senior Manager, Industrial Equipment supplier)</i>

exhibited moderate centralization, as they involved several individuals with special expertise, but only in a part-time capacity as they also had regular jobs. The limited available resources often meant that these project teams had to prioritize strategic or high-value customer cases.

“We have a three-person application team that works normally with converters and logistics. They have no direct customer responsibilities, their real job starts when our sales people find a new high-value machine buyer. They are like a task force, who gather around a difficult customer problem, and then make a proposal from our offering, how it could be used to get the most benefits out of it. But we use them mostly with technically complex and high value-added cases. It makes no sense to use them with basic motors and converters.” (Sales Director, power & automation supplier).

The data indicates that the mobilization of the project teams was seldom planned proactively, but more often reactive to emergent customer cases or needs for documented marketing material. This meant that the project teams were usually assembled “bottom-up”, through the initiatives of sales or customer managers when faced with a difficult or potentially high-value customer case; or albeit less frequently, “top-down” when a company division or, for example, a marketing department needed help building customer references for important customers or strategic business areas.

“This is a rarely, if ever planned activity, because these guys [virtual value team] have other responsibilities too. But we can consult them when the need arises, or in the best case scenario, request them at the site ... Sometimes they help marketing guys build customer references too” (Commercial Product Manager, Metallurgical Technology supplier).

The interviewees pointed out that the individuals in these project teams usually needed only little governance, but at the same time, the low standardization and formalization of activities meant that the insights from specific customer cases often remained as tacit knowledge and were seldom documented for broader organizational use.

“Those guys [task force] are multi-taskers, who feel that value issues are very important, and they want to work with them. They are self-motivated, and just want to do these things, you don't need to guide them [much] ...but afterwards, only they know what happened, and if we want to do a case study, they need to talk to marketing, but they don't usually have time for that.” (VP of Business Development, power & automation supplier).

Some interviewees felt that it was sometimes difficult to connect value experts across organizational boundaries, especially if there was no clear rules or governance structures to guide the coordination and utilization of expert resources between different units, or if the working practices

between organizational areas were too different. For example, overly rigid organizational structures or “resource protective” supervisors were seen to prevent value experts being “borrowed” from and between other teams.

“Too rigid organizational structures can slow this down. For example, if I'd like to get the guy who I've been doing these pilot projects with, who understands these things and is able to look for the customer's pain points, if I want to get him into this value team ... but if he works in a different organization or area it's very difficult ... Somebody might have more expertise, and be a better fit for that value team, but if he sits in a different organization, or under a different supervisor who doesn't see the importance of these [value] things ... This should not tie our hands, these value teams should work across organizational boundaries.” (Commercial Product Manager, Metallurgical Technology supplier).

Table 7 summarizes the key characteristics and potential implications of temporary and organizational value champions.

4.5. Temporary and individual roles: Part-time value ambassadors

Three of the firms employed value champions in temporary and individual roles. These were usually part-time positions, where specific individuals from sales or business development operated as value ambassadors or value specialists on specific occasions, including training events and specific customer cases, while retaining their regular jobs. This was usually perceived as a flexible and cost-effective approach to harness the expertise of skilled and/or enthusiastic individuals for broader organizational use, especially in smaller firms and local branches of global organizations. The interviewees explained that giving specialist resources “two hats” allowed them to draw on their value expertise when needed, without compromising other functions and avoiding potentially costly reshuffling or reorganization of resources.

“We have a global value manager, or value champion ... But that's too heavy a role for local organizations, like us. So, we're focused on documenting value and have this kind of super-user [local value ambassador], who can help and support others in value calculations... It's one role, but in a small organization people have to wear two hats.” (Managing Director, Industrial bearings supplier).

Some of the interviewees explained that leveraging individuals who were already embedded in the local organization facilitated the change management needed to implement new value-based practices and strategies. That is, when value ambassadors operated in dual roles inside the organization, they usually had a better grasp of existing practices and company culture, as well as the social landscape. This helped them be seen as “one-of-us” rather than “one-of-them”, and made it easier to

Table 7
Overview of the characteristics and implications of temporary and organizational value champions.

Key characteristics	Potential advantages and disadvantages	Indicative quotes
Ad-hoc project team with individuals from different application areas in part-time capacity	Enables sales support when a high-value business case is identified or needs troubleshooting	<i>“We have this kind of task force, which is usually an application team assembled for a specific need. We've used this with some cases, especially in the high-value product sales area.” (Business Unit Director, Automation Technology Supplier)</i>
	Limited resources force to prioritize strategic or high-value customer cases.	<i>“We have this kind of unofficial, virtual value team ... people who have the experience, understand both the technology and business aspects, and are able to identify the customer's pain points ... But they do that on top of their primary jobs, so we can't leverage them everywhere.” (Commercial Product Manager, Metallurgical Technology supplier)</i>
Low standardization and formalization of activities	Reactive to emergent customer cases or needs for documented marketing material	<i>“It's not usually planned... It usually needs to be some kind of special case for us to make the customer value assessment ... It has to have marketing value, for example a case for a magazine or something We have special guys for that.” (Sales Director, power & automation supplier)</i>
	Insights from specific customer cases often remain tacit knowledge and seldom documented	<i>“We have a few guys who do these value tasks... But it's still very opportunistic and emergent ... our next goal is to get them to share their experiences and knowledge, and help sales build documented references.” (Director of Automation, Metallurgical Technology supplier)</i>
Low to moderate centralization: expertise dispersed across the organization	Sometimes difficult to connect value experts across organizational boundaries without clear governance structures	<i>“That team's main role is to convince the customer in difficult sales situations ... but it depends on the sales guy's activity if and how much they want to push to get them ..., some don't do it at all, and some want to involve them more and use them all the way, but it requires a lot of talking to their supervisors.” (Sales Director, power & automation supplier)</i>

lobby and propose new value initiatives.

“Value ambassadors, they have these dual roles, to pass on value-based selling, but then also to bridge it to the local organization. And since they are already part of either sales or business development, they’re already there in those sales meetings, and they understand how things are usually done and who does what.... That’s a big cultural change, and we didn’t want to try to change the organization completely. So what we did was to use these value ambassadors to show how it had worked in specific cases, what they had done, and in the end, when it’s one of them, they got the message.” (Marketing Manager 2, Chemical Technology supplier).

Other interviewees felt that without a formal governance structure and clear responsibilities, it was sometimes difficult for “part-time value professionals” to convince or motivate other people to learn and take on new activities, such as value analyses or case documentation, which usually fell outside their normal duties. A lack of top management support or a clearly communicated organizational agenda often made trying to push and implement value initiatives alone an uphill battle.

“In the beginning, our organization was not ready for that kind of operation, where a business development guy was some kind of value professional and told them that now you have to analyze how much value our solutions actually deliver ...our delivery guys did not understand why they have to do that, there was a lot of resistance ... until our top management started really pushing it.” (Commercial Product Manager, Metallurgical Technology supplier).

Since value ambassadors operated in part-time roles, they often had little time to formally “debrief” or document their insights for broader organizational use. This meant that while the individuals provided a flexible and cost-effective way to evaluate and analyze ongoing customer cases, their insights about potential value drivers, cost reductions and business impacts related to particular projects were rarely systematically codified or documented, hindering the diffusion and dissemination of value-related knowledge for broader organizational use.

“Those value guys are the change agents, whose goal is to support sales, maybe product management, and also projects, and bring that value culture closer to our firm ... but for example [name] has his own responsibilities, and it’s difficult to just drop all that so you can write a reference story, marketing plan, or some other project that would help others utilize his insights.” (Director of Automation, Metallurgical Technology supplier).

Table 8 summarizes the key characteristics and potential implications of temporary and individual value champions.

5. Discussion

The empirical observations from this study indicate that customer value management is becoming an increasingly specialized and

professional enterprise, and that value-oriented firms are increasingly employing dedicated value champions to implement and facilitate customer value management (c.f., Liozu, 2017). While the benefits (and challenges) of using dedicated resources and specialists’ functions have been studied in adjacent fields, such as pricing (Liozu et al., 2012), innovation (Jaakkola & Hallin, 2018), and solutions research (Hakanen, 2014), they have remained relatively underexplored and superficially understood in the emerging value-based marketing research (Anderson et al., 2007; Keränen & Jalkala, 2014). This study extends this literature by showing how firms are actively bringing value-based marketing to life by employing and leveraging specialized value champions in individual and organizational roles, whose primary goal is to facilitate understanding, quantifying, and communicating value systemically across intra- and inter-firm boundaries (c.f., Terho et al., 2017).

The findings indicate that employing value champions in permanent and organizational roles (Table 5) is a highly centralized, formalized, and standardized approach. It rests on building separate units or strategic functions to support and facilitate the implementation of customer value management across global organizations and local business units. Its main advantage is that it enables the systematic development, documentation, and diffusion of value tools, processes, scalable services, and codified knowledge, for broader organizational use. It is, however, highly resource-intensive, and over-reliance on it may impair the skills acquisition and credibility of the regular sales personnel.

Employing value champions in permanent and individual roles (Table 6) seems to be a moderately centralized, formalized and standardized approach. It rests on recruiting key experts and senior professionals who can promote, endorse and champion value management activities and strategies across internal functions and selected customer accounts or segments. The main advantage is that it enables the analysis and quantification of selected, high-value customer cases and projects, and enables educating and encouraging internal and external stakeholders. The main disadvantage is that it is highly person dependent, and allocating scarce resources can be challenging in the crosscurrent of multiple competing needs and requirements.

Employing value champions in temporary and organizational roles (Table 7) appears to feature moderate centralization, but low formalization and standardization. It rests on assembling ad-hoc project teams which can provide sales support or troubleshooting for selected, high-value customer cases. The main advantage of this approach is the potential to bring together a temporary group of enthusiastic experts that reacts to emergent needs with little extra governance. Little governance and proactive planning means, though, that insights and knowledge from customer cases are rarely documented, and coordinating experts across organizational area can be difficult.

Employing value champions in temporary and individual roles (Table 8) seems to be an approach that features low centralization, formalization and standardization, and rests on leveraging enthusiastic and knowledgeable individuals in part-time positions to champion

Table 8
Overview of the characteristics and implications of temporary and individual value champions.

Key characteristics	Potential advantages and disadvantages	Indicative quotes
Specialized individuals in part-time positions	Flexible and cost-effective approach to harness the expertise of skilled and/or enthusiastic individuals May facilitate change management to implement new value-based practices and strategies	<i>“We do this only internally. We are not hiring specific people, these value-based experts or value ambassadors, externally. What we have done is that we use internal people, which we have seen as having high potential for value-based selling... they wear two hats all the time” (Marketing Manager, Chemical technology supplier)</i> <i>“One way is to preach in sales meetings, share experiences and best practices, look how much money we made out of it and look at the cost margin and, look at this. Another way is to, in discussion with colleagues, in sales meetings, or in other places, to identify potential points where value-based selling could be used ... And when this comes from your peers, it’s usually easier to digest and accept it.” (Commercial Product Manager, Metallurgical Technology supplier)</i>
Low centralization and little formal governance	Can be difficult to influence other people without formal governance or authority	<i>“The challenge is the cultural mindset inside the sales organizations ... As a value ambassador, you need to be in coaching mode, actively listen and have a certain set of soft skills to understand the morale of salespeople ... to recognize where they can sell value and where they can’t.” (Marketing Manager 2, Chemical technology supplier)</i>
Low formalization	Little time to document insights; may hinder diffusion of value-related knowledge	<i>“We have a few value guys who are really good at selling these things to customers, but they are usually so busy with their customers that they don’t always have time to document what happened or how things were measured.” (Sales Executive, Industrial bearings supplier)</i>

value initiatives. The main advantage is that it enables a flexible and cost-effective approach to harness expert resources, which is especially useful in small or local organizations. The main disadvantage is that limited resources usually impair the documentation and dissemination insights and accumulated knowledge from specific projects.

Fig. 1 provides a synthesis of the main findings of this study. The framework suggests that firms can employ four different role configurations for value championing that have a different nature and structural characteristics. Each configuration has unique implications for value management, which feature relatively distinct key advantages and disadvantages. Depending on their needs, available resources, and organizational structure, firms can employ particular role configurations to successfully implement and facilitate customer value management.

6. Conclusions and implications

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Taken together, the findings of this study provide new and empirically grounded insights that make several contributions to current customer value and organizational championing research.

First, this study contributes to the emerging customer value literature by showing how firms can use value champions to implement customer value management. Previous studies and conventional practice have considered customer value management traditionally as a sales responsibility, but noted the emergent challenges that usually follow with this approach (Terho et al., 2017; Töytäri et al., 2017; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). In contrast, this study illustrates how leading firms in business markets consider customer value management more broadly as a strategic issue, and instead of delegating it to sales, employ value champions as specialist and expert resources to implement customer value management. These findings broaden the current perspective in customer value research, which has mostly focused on individual-level determinants of value selling success, such as sales skills and behaviors (Terho et al., 2012; Töytäri et al., 2017). Only recently has the value literature begun to consider organizational-level determinants of value management (e.g., Terho et al., 2017; Kienzler, Kindström, & Brashear Alejandro, 2019), but thus far, these examinations have not taken organizational value champions into account, which according to this study may play a critical role in facilitating customer value management. Overall, the findings from this study suggest that a broader scope for resources, requirements, and responsibilities for value management exists than is currently documented in the literature (Terho et al., 2012; 2017). This is an important insight with strategic implications, because in line with recent notions of broader value

responsibilities in a solution context (Keränen & Jalkala, 2013; Macdonald et al., 2016), it shifts the focus and responsibility of customer value management to higher (and broader) levels in supplier organizations.

Second, while emerging research has noted that value-oriented firms in business markets can and indeed do use value champions (Anderson et al., 2007; Keränen & Jalkala, 2014), it has not systematically unpacked the range, characteristics, or possible trade-offs between different value championing approaches. This study extends this research by illuminating how value champions can be employed in four alternative role configurations, and revealing the specific structural characteristics, as well as distinct advantages and disadvantages, that each configuration embodies. This adds to the current literature by providing a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of how customer value management can be integrated into the supplier's organizational structure (Eggert et al., 2019), and responds to recent calls to increase understanding on more formalized and specialized roles that managers can adopt to champion, implement, and manage all value processes in their organization (Corsaro, 2019; Liozu, 2017). This is an important notion, because it opens up new ways to look at how customer value management can be organized, structured, and “managed” in supplier organizations.

Third, this study contributes to the organizational championing literature by expanding and complementing the current knowledge on the different roles that champions can adopt. For example, previous organizational championing literature has considered champions mostly as individual-level roles that are relatively informal and “not [be] well defined within the organization's chain of command” (Howell et al., 2005; Kelley & Lee, 2010, p. 1010). In contrast, this study shows that champions can adopt more formal, systematic, and organizational-level roles, and suggests that the champions' visibility in the organization chart may be contingent upon the nature and formality of their role (permanent or temporary). In other words, whereas the prior research has viewed championing mostly as an emergent, non-routine, and relatively uncoordinated activity (Chakrabarti, 1974), the findings of this study illustrate how championing can also be a proactive, routinized, and highly coordinated activity, particularly in the permanent role configurations. This adds to the extant literature by providing a more strategic and systematic view on championing, which may help to plan, organize, and manage championing activities better. Furthermore, previous research has distinguished different types of championing roles based on their knowledge or expertise base (Klerkx & Aarts, 2013). This study demonstrates how different types of championing roles can be distinguished based on their organizational characteristics too, thus expanding the current understanding on the variety and scope of roles organizational champions can adopt. Taken together, these are important

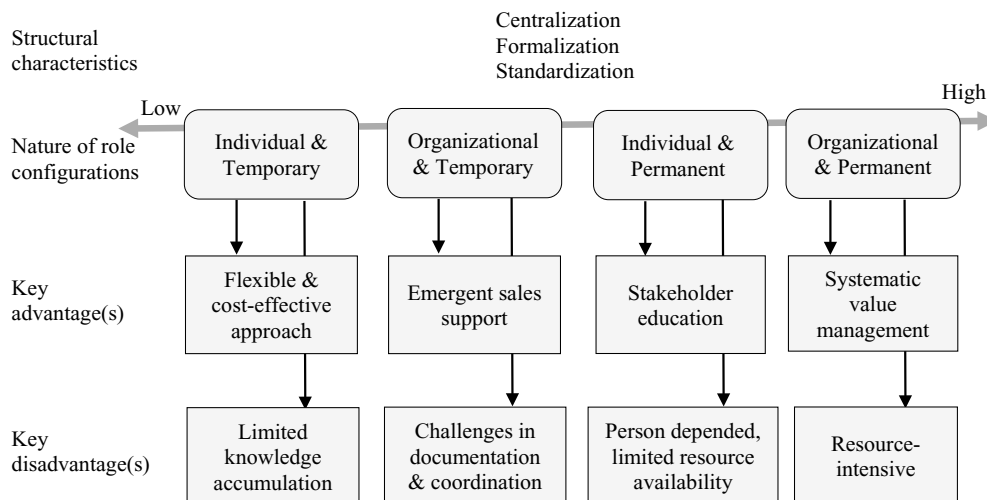


Fig. 1. Characteristics and implications of different role configurations for value championing in business markets.

Table 9
Illustrative examples of different ways to employ value champions.

Nature	Individual	Organizational
Permanent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fragmented value management ● Decentralized value-management approach ● Divisions can define their own process & methods ● Top divisional leader dependent ● Mix of top-down and bottom-up effort ● Example: Portfolio firm, PE & VC firms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Large-scale global value management ● Centralized value-management approach ● Standardized value-management process & methods ● Strong top leadership championing ● Top-down driven ● Example: Mature Global MNC
Temporary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Isolated or local value management ● A small business, division, or region leading a project ● Decentralized value-management approach ● Portion of the value-management process ● Mix of top-down and bottom-up effort ● Example: SMEs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Partial or integrated value management ● Part of a marketing or commercial transformation ● Value management added to the standard tool box ● Existing staff are given value-management roles ● Top-down driven ● Example: Developing Global MNC

insights, because they suggest that instead of being only emergent and informal activity that is limited to key individuals and their spheres of influence, championing can be also more formal and “manageable” organizational practice, which can be systematically leveraged to influence interactions across intra- and interorganizational boundaries.

6.2. Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, this study has several important and actionable implications. First, it emphasizes that successful customer value management in contemporary business markets requires specialist skills and knowledge. Expecting that a traditional, often goods-versed sales force will easily adopt value-oriented practices and behaviors is not, in many cases, very realistic (c.f., [Ulag & Loveland, 2014](#); [Töytäri et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, firms should develop, recruit, and train value champions who are not only responsible, but also capable of developing, mastering and promoting different value training, coaching and consultation programs, as well as value assessment tools, processes, and systems across the organization.

Second, this study illustrates alternative approaches to employing value champions in business markets, of which each has its unique structural characteristics, benefits and challenges. Firms can adopt a specific value championing approach depending on their offerings, strategic goals and resource constraints. For example, the *permanent and organizational approach* is particularly suitable for large and global firms that have a steady stream of highly complex, customized and knowledge-intensive high-value customer projects in their portfolio. To implement this approach, firms need to develop a critical mass of value-related skills and knowledge, and establish separate organizational units or functions that operate as professional “consulting arms”, and help to embed this knowledge into the firm’s everyday business practices. This approach seems to align particularly well with a center-led organizational design where internal customer value champions might rely on divisional and local value champions to relay specific programs.

The *permanent and individual approach* is particularly suitable for firms whose offering portfolio consists chiefly of complex and service-intensive offerings, or separate business activities with different degrees of marketing maturity and differentiation intensity, but do not have sufficient resources or turnover to justify a fully-fledged value specialist unit or function. These organizations could for example, be private equity firms, large industrial diversified groups, or start-up incubators within larger organizations. To implement this approach, firms can recruit or promote experienced senior professionals with a broad industry understanding and deep customer value knowledge, and embed them in the marketing, innovation, pricing, or business development teams to develop, implement, and support a holistic value management process. This approach seems to align particularly well with a decentralized organizational design, where particular organizational entities might recruit and staff value positions and roles based on their unique needs and requirements.

The *temporary and organizational approach* is particularly suitable to product and service firms that have selected high-value offerings or customized solutions in their offering portfolio, or firms who are planning to initiate a large-scale transformation in value-related areas such as marketing, pricing, or commercial excellence. To implement this approach, firms can assemble a project team with value experts or value enthusiasts from different functions (i.e., sales, product management, innovation, marketing, pricing), and train them to become specific organizational resources that are available on demand and can support the implementation of specific, value-related activities. This approach seems to align particularly well with a center-supported organizational design where specific functions may not have sufficient resources to govern their own value champions, but need (or benefit from) the support of shared organizational resources for value management.

The *temporary and individual approach* is particularly suitable for smaller organizations or local branches, which may have limited resources. To implement this approach, firms could nominate (but not necessarily incentivize) enthusiastic and high-performing sales or business development managers as value champions or value ambassadors, and let them take responsibility for specific value management initiatives or programs. For example, this approach is appropriate for organizations that want to promote and improve customer value targeted activities – such as value proposition, or value driver analyses or value quantification workshops – as part of larger scale commercial, marketing, or pricing programs. This approach seems to align particularly well with a decentralized organizational design, where local units or divisions have the flexibility to employ expert individuals in dual roles as specific needs emerge. [Table 9](#) provides a summary of the different approaches.

6.3. Limitations and future research avenues

While this study offers important insights into current industrial marketing research and managerial practice, it also has some limitations, which provide directions for future research. First, this study employed a qualitative research design to explore how firms employ value champions, and identify the specific advantages and disadvantages of alternative approaches. While the size and diversity of the empirical data lends support to generalizability across multiple domains in business markets, further qualitative research could extend the findings by exploring the antecedents and contingencies of specific value championing approaches, or focusing on firms in other sectors to reveal alternative championing approaches. In addition, further empirical research could examine when and how value champions actually influence firm performance, as well as customer perceptions of the use of value champions.

Second, this study was explorative in nature and shed light on the characteristics and implications of alternative approaches to organizing value champions, future studies could delve deeper into the requirements and implications of specific value championing approaches or

role configurations. For example, anecdotal evidence has highlighted the increasing importance and use of formally recognized Chief Value Officers (Anderson et al., 2007; Liozu, 2016) and specific Value Proposition Directors (Payne, Frow, & Eggert, 2017), roles that were scarcely visible in our data. Future studies could explore how firms design, develop and internalize these, often C-level roles which are likely to carry more strategic importance and influence over time, what kind of activities and strategic tasks those roles might entail, and how they will influence and shape customer value-related decisions at intra- and inter-firm boundaries.

Third, this study has examined value championing from an organizational perspective, and future studies could complement these insights from an individual perspective. Previous studies indicate that individual characteristics and personality traits play an important role in driving the success (or failure) of both championing (Howell & Higgins, 1990), and value management efforts (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). Future studies could integrate these insights, and explore what kind of individual characteristics and personality traits are more (or less) suitable for value championing, or how different psychological profiles might influence value championing efforts internally and externally. This would help managers and organizations to recruit, select, educate, and train suitable individuals for specific value championing roles. Another interesting approach would be to examine what kind of individuals usually adopt value championing roles, and which types of positions, functions, or backgrounds they usually come or are recruited from.

Finally, although this study draws insights from a long-term collaboration with several participating firms, it provides a relatively static analysis of the alternative approaches firms use to employ value

champions. An interesting avenue for future research would be to employ a combination of longitudinal, ethnographic and/or action-based research, and explore how firms dynamically design, develop, and disband different value champion role configurations over time. In other words, how different approaches can morph or be scaled back into other approaches (i.e., temporary and individual approach grows into permanent and/or organizational approach) and what kind of drivers, barriers, and contingencies may facilitate or hinder such dynamic approach to role development and adoption.

Given the increasing need and attention to “manage” customer value in the contemporary B2B space (Liozu, 2017), we consider expanding our understanding of value champions, specialized customer value managers, and other designated value professionals as particularly interesting, actionable and important avenues for future B2B marketing research. Therefore, to encourage and stimulate future research in this area, we conclude this article with a research agenda (see Table 10), which summarizes the potential avenues and research questions that seem fruitful and managerially relevant.

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Table 10

Future research agenda.

- 1. Antecedents, contingencies, and outcomes of value championing**
 - a) What (individual, organizational, or industry-level) factors drive or hinder the use of value champions?
 - b) How and when do value champions influence firm performance?
 - c) Do alternative value championing approaches have different performance effects, and if so: why, how, and under what conditions?
 - d) How do value champions influence buyer-supplier relationships?
 - e) What kind of customer perceptions does value championing elicit?
- 2. Requirements and implications of specific value championing approaches**
 - a) Why and how firms adopt specific value championing approaches?
 - b) What kind of activities and practices do specific championing roles involve?
 - c) What kind of behaviors (i.e., rational, technical, social, psychological) are associated with specific value championing roles, and how do different behaviors influence value management?
 - d) How does the value champion's position in the firm's hierarchy (i.e. C-level executive vs. middle manager or application specialist) impact his/her responsibilities and possibility to influence to others?
- 3) Individual characteristics and personality traits of value champions**
 - a) What kind of individual/personality traits are more (or less) suitable for value champions?
 - b) What kind of psychological profiles are more (or less) suitable for value champions?
 - c) What kind of skills, competences, and knowledge are more (or less) suitable for value champions?
 - d) What are the potential performance effects of different individual characteristics and personality traits?
 - e) From what kind of roles and/or backgrounds do individuals' transition to value champion roles?
- 4) Transformation journeys towards value champions**
 - a) How do firms establish or develop specific value champion roles, and how do the roles evolve over time?
 - b) How and when can different role configurations morph or be scaled back into other configurations?
 - c) Do firms follow specific transition paths from one role configuration to another, and if so, what are the specific triggers, conditions, and barriers that influence this transition?
 - d) Do firms disband value champions, and if so, why and under what conditions?
 - e) How do firms train, incentivize and motivate value champions?

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