Conducting case study research in non-profit organisations

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on the transactional relationship between retailers and handicrafts suppliers using case study research.

Design/methodology/approach – Various reports on the handicraft sector were studied. Interactions with industry experts also helped clarify various issues confronting the industry. Preliminary visits to organizations working in this area were undertaken to know the ground realities of the handicraft sector.

Findings – To prove the reliability of the case study process and enable others to replicate it, the steps and procedures must be clearly explicit and well documented in the final report. In this research, the steps that are followed to collect the data have been described in detail so that other researchers can apply the case study process and achieve similar results.

Originality/value – Scholarship focussing on organised retail as well as handicrafts production and marketing is well developed. There is vast literature on the former from the developed economies though the Indian context is only beginning to be researched. Similarly, there are a large number of scholarly and popular writings on the latter. Yet, there is a paucity of scholarship on the buyer-supplier transactions.

Keywords Case studies, Non-profit organizations, Handicrafts, Retailers, India

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Scholarship focussing on organised retail as well as handicrafts production and marketing is well developed. There is vast literature on the former from the developed economies though the Indian context is only beginning to be researched. Similarly, there are a large number of scholarly and popular writings on the latter. Yet, there is a paucity of scholarship on the buyer-supplier transactions. The research is positioned as a study in the intersection (or focussing on the transactional relationship) between the retailers and handicrafts suppliers.

Due to the lack of a common measure of buyer-supplier relationship by different researchers the results of these studies are often difficult to compare. Different studies operationalize it differently. Added to that, most of the studies have dealt the phenomenon from either buyer's or supplier's point of view. Very few studies have taken dyad perspective. Apart from it, contextual difference due to geography, sector, and product needs to be addressed. So, we took recourse to case study research.

Creswell (2007) outlined five methodological approaches to qualitative inquiry: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, and case study research. Case study research was adopted

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for the study as it fits the requirement of answering the question being asked in the research study. Emphasis on how rather than how many led to this methodology (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). The case study research comes from an interpretive paradigm. It is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores bounded system through detailed, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case based themes (Creswell, 2007). This is a type of qualitative research design that is often descriptive in nature, and has been deemed highly suitable for studies whereby the researcher aims at investigating specific issues in depth and detail (Patton, 2002).

Eisenhardt (1989) views the case study research as a useful strategy in the development of theory. In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. In other words, one has to choose the methodology based on three conditions:

(1) the type of research question posed;

(2) the extent of control the investigator has over actual behavioural events; and

(3) the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events (Yin, 2003).

These arguments are highly applicable for this study, and can be positioned within this methodological paradigm.

The study was conducted in three phases:

- First, scope was finalised mapping as many as retailers from diverse set using secondary sources. This effort concluded with short-listing of retailers, who were contacted for support during data collection.
- Second stage began with consent from retailers. Cases were constructed using the information/data gathered through interviews, observations and secondary sources. Both the retailers and their suppliers were sources of such information/data.
- Third stage findings of the research were validated by sharing them with retailers and the feedback was incorporated.

Detail of the process follows.

2. Research design

A research design is an action plan for getting from here to there, where here may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of conclusions to be reached (Yin, 2003). Once the researcher becomes involved in the case study at the site, there are likely to be temptations to pick up issues other than those planned. Stake (1995, 2006) believed that the temptation to be drawn away from the topic of study is one of the most serious problems in case study research. To avoid that research questions need to be clearly stated from the start. There are both practical and social reasons for choosing a clear research topic (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). These questions provide the research project with direction and coherence, they keep the researcher focused, they provide a framework when writing up the research, and they pinpoint the methods and data that will be needed (Eisenhardt, 1989). As stated earlier our idea was to understand the buyer-supplier relationship in handicraft sector.

To start, an extensive study of the existing literature on the issue of buyer-supplier relationship was taken up and at the same time literature on handicrafts was also explored to understand the changes taking place in handicraft industry in India.

Being new to the handicraft industry, researcher read various reports on handicraft sector. Interactions with industry experts also helped clarifying various issues confronting the industry. Preliminary visits to organizations working in this area were undertaken to know the ground realities of handicraft sector. Interactions with non-profit organisation employees working in this sector provided valuable insights into the characteristics and dynamics of the industry. They also pointed towards other sources of data describing the nature of this industry. All these efforts helped in brining valuable insights into the case studies undertaken with the concerned organisations. Theoretical models on buyer-supplier relationships have been guiding data collection and structuring the study. It was deemed necessary to include major variables used in aforementioned studies, to answer the research questions posed here. Instead of hypothesis the study relied on several research issues that were gradually defined and redefined as the empirical inquiry progressed.

2.1 Unit of analysis and case selection

Once the case is defined, the unit of analysis needs to be determined. The unit of analysis is defined as where the researcher obtains data for the case study. To inductively explore the research questions guiding the study, an organizational context of buyer-supplier relationship in handicraft sector was selected. In case study inquiry the case represents the main unit of analysis, which may be an individual, an entity, an event, organizational change, implementation processes, etc. In case studies, there is a choice of a holistic or embedded design (Yin, 2003). A holistic design examines the global nature of the phenomenon, whereas an embedded design additionally pays attention to sub-units. To capture the different levels of analysis involved in our research, we employed an embedded multiple-case design. Cases can be single or multiple and can be constructed using cross-sectional or longitudinal data (Aaltio and Heilmann, 2010). Here, we constructed three cases using cross-sectional data. In each case, we compared the buyer-supplier relationship by taking into consideration the perspective of artisans as well as retailers. Such a design type is seen to generally improve the rigor of the inquiry as comparisons of different cases force the investigator to look at data in many divergent ways (Eisenhardt, 1989) (Table I).

In contrast to a statistically oriented sampling used in deductive research approaches, inductive case studies opt for a theoretically oriented sampling of cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). That means that they are selected in order to provide useful

One case	Several cases
Cross sectional data	
An internal tension in a setting for research; comparing dimensions as research object	Comparing the cases on the selected dimensions
Longitudinal data	
Studying change in the selected dimensions	Comparing changes between the cases on the selected dimensions

Source: Aaltio and Heilmann (2010)

Table I.
Application possibilities of a case study

and valuable contributions for the constructs and variables in question. Case studies can involve single or multiple cases. The problem of single cases is limitations in generalizability and several information-processing biases (Eisenhardt, 1989). One way to respond to these biases is by applying a multi-case approach. Multiple cases augment external validity and help guard against observer biases. Moreover, multiple cases add confidence to findings and strengthen the quality and reliability of case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003).

Since nonprofit can be from government as well as non-government sector, a multi-case design was used, and three organizations were studied. Cases were selected based on the criteria that the organization must be from non-profit sector, engaged in the retail of handicrafts, and willing to share the information required. Initially organizations were identified by media search, colleague recommendations, and discussion with industry people. This resulted in a short list of possible organisations. In order to avoid bias in choosing the sample, different sources such as organizations' web sites, expert referrals, database search, and published papers, news articles, etc. were used. In this study, three organizations are considered adequate as:

- these organizations cover both government and non-government; and
- different stages of operation.

The study relied on flexibility in terms of changing the sample size and the direction of the case during the course of research. Sometimes new factors were revealed that prompted gathering of more data about events that had happened in the past, whereas other times other unexpected issues appeared that made me want to seek out new information (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). The empirical material was gathered, organised and analysed continuously as the research process progressed.

3. Data collection methods

Gathering data begins when the background reading, research, and planning get completes. Everything read and discussed has influence on the researcher. Personal interviews were the major source of primary data collection. The literature survey for this research started at the beginning of 2007. But intensive primary data collection started in early January 2009 and ended in April 2009. Before this intensive data collection, pilot interviews were conducted with two organizations (not case study organizations) for the purpose of demonstrating and testing the feasibility of the study. This resulted in slight change in topic to accommodate field reality. Instead of prior topic of supplier selection, we had to opt for buyer-supplier relationship issue.

The researcher and the focal firms had two meetings prior to the start of the data collection. Here, we discussed the premises for the research study and data collection. In the first meeting, the researcher informed the firms about his theoretical and empirical interests, research topic and the issues that he wanted to examine using a case study methodology. In the second meeting, the researcher informed organisations that face-to-face interviews, documents and observations would constitute basis for empirical inquires. In each case study organization, one employee was focal contact point, co-ordinating and integrating the process. These individuals became door openers, as they informed their organisations about the purpose of the research, the researcher's mandate and how they expected others to accommodate demands made by the researcher. During the data collection period, the researcher was involved in

85 semi-structured interviews, and nine focused group interviews. In addition, the researcher accessed information available on web sites, confidential documents such as strategy plans, business contracts, formal project plans, and annual reports.

Yin (2003) stated that a major strength of case studies is the opportunity to use many different sources of data. Not all of these sources of data were used to answer each research question, but each research question did have multiple sources of information, as well as different methods to obtain data. Use of multiple methods and multiple sources as forms of triangulation makes case study findings not only more comprehensive but also more complicated, because so many perspectives are represented. Case study approach typically combines data collection methods such as documents, archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observations. A combination of interviews, archives, and observation were chosen for the study, with emphasis on the first two. A review of some categories of data is presented in the following sub-sections.

3.1 Interview

Interviews are one of the richest sources of data in a case study and usually the most important type of data to be collected. Interviews provide the researcher with information from a variety of perspectives. As mentioned earlier, this study builds mainly on 85 semi-structured interviews, and nine focused group interviews with:

- employees of retail organizations;
- artisans associated with the suppliers; and
- officials of organizations like promotional agencies, other retail organizations dealing in handicraft sector.

When relying on interviews as the primary data collection method, the issue of building trust between the researcher and the interviewees becomes very important. To address this researcher clarified purpose of the interview to the respondent before conducting the semi-structure interview. Issues like relevance of the study, consent from top management, and how the empirical data was going to be used were explained to the respondents. In many cases, the top management's consent was an important prerequisite for the respondent's input. As many respondents feel uncomfortable with recording devices they were not used to record the interview sessions. This helped in building an open and flexible conversation. It was clarified to the respondents that their names will not be quoted. The information received would be coded and structured in such a way that it would not be possible to hold specific individuals accountable for statements or views. A running note was kept for recording the interview sessions.

The emergent and iterative nature of the research process led to interviews being collected through a snowballing strategy (Patton, 2002). There were three ways of determining which specific individuals to interview. First, the respondents were selected based on the researcher's own assessments regarding what individuals he needed to interview to get the information he was interested in. Second, the respondents were selected after the researcher had asked contact person for names of relevant respondents. Third, the respondents were revealed through interviews with specific respondents where respondents could often recommend me to speak with this or that person. The interview guide was designed with the overall objective to capture interesting aspects directly related to the research topic and issues of the thesis. These dimensions were used as a way to write down the responses.

Focus group interviews are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperate with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information. With this approach, however, care must be taken to encourage all participants to talk and to monitor individuals who may dominate the conversation. In this research, focused group interview were conducted initially due to hesitance shown by individuals.

3.2 Documents

Documents collected during data collection were official letters of correspondence, project proposals, progress reports, action plans, and articles appearing in print media. Documents were used as inputs to the interview guide and saved time in interviews. They were also useful for tracing the history of the organizations and statements made by key people in the organizations. Further they were helpful in counteracting the biases of respondents.

3.3 Observation

Observations are another important source of information in case studies. Here, in this research direct observation were used. The major strength of direct observation is that it is unobtrusive and does not require direct interaction with participants. It can illuminate the discrepancies between what people said in the interviews and casual conversations and what they actually do. Though the researcher noted down some observations, but major source of information was interviews.

3.4 Data analysis

Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003) recommend studying and analyzing each case before investigating cross-case analysis to detect patterns. Following this recommended data-analysis process in case study research, the first step of our data analysis resulted in an initial within-case analysis, while the second led to an in-depth cross-case analysis. Data gathered from interviews, documents, and observations were used to understand, analyse, and describe the case. This analysis was driven by the research questions. A sub-section was written based on the research questions for which data was grouped accordingly to produce three descriptive cases.

The comparison between the cases constituted the next step in the analysis. Here, again the dimensions used in writing individual case studies were used for comparison and contrast with the findings. This improved likelihood of accurate and reliable theory, that is, theory with a close fit to the data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

4. Research quality

Although case study research is less formalized than hypothesis testing research, some strategies have been proven to be beneficial for increasing the transparency, reliability and validity of a case study. This sub-section discusses the process adopted.

4.1 Validity

The problems of validity in qualitative studies are related to the fact that most qualitative researchers work alone in the field, they focus on the findings rather than describing how the results were reached, and they are limited in processing information (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The criterion of validity refers to the degree to which a study supports the intended conclusion drawn from the results (Yin, 2003). It encompasses three aspects construct, internal and external validity.

4.1.1 Construct validity. Construct validity in case studies refers to developing operational set of measures for the terms and concepts used in the study. It is strengthened by the use of multiple sources of evidence to build construct measures, which define the construct and distinguish it from other constructs. These multiple sources of evidence can include multiple viewpoints within and across the data sources. By using more than one case study, one can validate stability of construct across situations. In order to improve the construct validity of the terms and concepts used in this research, use of multiple sources of information, and multiple cases was adopted. This helped to see issues from different perspectives and establish a chain of evidence that links parts together.

4.1.2 External validity. External validity is concerned with whether the findings can be generalized, which is often questioned and is thus a major source of criticism within case study research (Yin, 2003). Even if the question of generalizability is inherent in case study research, it can be enhanced by theoretical sampling and multiple cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). Survey research relies on statistical generalization. Case studies rely on analytical generalization. In analogy to survey research, selecting an appropriate sampling is crucial to enhancing generalizability. Case study research thus opts for a theoretically oriented sampling of cases in such a way that provides useful and valuable contributions for the constructs and variables in question (Eisenhardt, 1989). An embedded multiple case design seeking comparisons of patterns across cases strengthens particularly the external validity of a case study (Yin, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989). Hartley (1994) states that the detailed knowledge of the organization and especially the knowledge about the processes underlying the behaviour and its context can help to specify the conditions under which behaviour can be expected to occur. In this research, we address this issue by using theoretical sampling as well as multiple cases.

4.1.3 Internal validity. Internal validity concerns the validity of the postulated relationships among the concepts. The main problem of internal validity as a criterion in qualitative research is that it is often not open to scrutiny. Recognition of this problem has led to calls for better documentation of the processes of data collection, the data itself, and the interpretative contribution of the researcher. Internal validity results from strategies that eliminate ambiguity and contradiction, filling in detail and establishing strong connections in data. On way to deal with this is what is known as respondent validation. This suggests that the researcher should go back to the subjects with his/her tentative results and refine them in the light of subjects' reactions (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). Such a process is there to check and test whether the empirical material have been correctly understood and interpreted. It is assumed that the respondents are the ones best qualified to determine this.

4.2 Reliability

The criterion of reliability refers to the possibility that any other independent researcher can replicate the study and generate the same findings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). Reliability focuses on whether process of the study is consistent and reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Thus, ensuring reliability is about minimizing errors and biases in the study. In line with Yin (2003), the following procedures were used to enhance the reliability of the study:

- Documentation of research procedure: to prove reliability of the case study process and enable others to replicate it, the steps and procedures must be clearly explicit and well documented in the final report. In this research, the steps that are followed to collect the data have been described in detail so that other researchers can apply the case study process and achieve similar results.
- Case study data base: a detailed electronic data base was established containing the interviews transcribed, and the documents used.
- Chain of evidence: establishing a chain of evidence refers to enabling an external reader to follow the argumentation by providing evidence from the initial research questions to the study's conclusion. Case descriptions were structured according to the research questions and relations under study, thereby enabling the reader to trace back any conclusions made to their related empirical evidence.

The trustworthiness of the thesis has also been ensured through continuous review and elucidation. The researcher has participated in conferences held at different institutions with papers that other researchers got the chance to comment on and provide feedback. Researcher also made several presentations on this research at Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA). In conclusion, the continuous feedback received on various thesis drafts throughout the process through seminars, conferences and workshops added to the trustworthiness of the study.

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