

Research paper

Exploring proactive market strategies

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ABSTRACT

Proactivity is an important driver of firm performance and for the creation of customer value on business-to-business markets. It is however not entirely clear what it is proactive firms actually do to achieve success. By investigating proactive firms' market strategies, i.e. the sets of activities they perform in order to create superior customer value, a holistic overview of the activities involved in proactive market strategies is provided. Through a case study of five proactive firms, proactive activities are identified. Using three strategic orientations—customer, competition, and innovation orientation—unique proactivity profiles are created, reflecting the patterns in the identified proactive activities. Through these profiles, three overarching proactive market strategies are forwarded: market shaping, customer engagement, and innovation leadership. These are proposed to act as generic proactive market strategies, representing coordinated proactive activities driven by multiple strategic orientations and aimed at creating customer value. These generic strategies help us understand of the role of proactivity in crafting high-performing market strategies by representing different routes to success.

1. Introduction

Being proactive in managing markets and when engaging with customers is becoming an important driver for the creation of customer value, enabling more proactive firms to achieve superior business performance (e.g. Blocker, Flint, Myers, & Slater, 2011; Narver, Slater, & MacLachlan, 2004). Proactive firms gain this competitive advantage by having a superior understanding of their customers and such an understanding allows them to satisfy customers' latent needs, anticipate future needs, and ultimately create superior customer value (Narver et al., 2004). This is particularly important for firms in a business-to-business (B2B) context, where complex customer needs (Avlonitis & Gounaris, 1997; Flint, Woodruff, & Gardial, 2002; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005) as well as deeper customer relationships (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Tuominen, Rajala, & Möller, 2004; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) put greater demand on firms' capabilities to create customer value (Elg, Delignoul, Ghauri, Danis, & Tarnovskaya, 2012; Kindström, Ottosson, & Carlborg, 2018; Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant, & Morgan, 2012). By increasing the level of proactivity in their market strategies, B2B firms can better deal with this added complexity and create customer value, thereby achieving superior business performance (Day, 2011; Narver et al., 2004; Tsai, Chou, & Kuo, 2008).

In this research, we define market strategy as a set of activities that firms employ to create superior customer value and improve business

performance (Varadarajan, 2010), with proactive market strategy thus corresponding to proactive strategies for creating superior customer value. Although some proactive aspects of market strategy have been investigated previously (e.g., Blocker et al., 2011; Kindström et al., 2018; Ottosson & Kindström, 2016), there have not, to the best of our knowledge, been any studies that take a holistic approach to the activities involved in proactive market strategies. Consequently, there is a need for more research to broaden our understanding of proactive market strategies—including what they are and how they are implemented. This is, as mentioned earlier, specifically interesting in a B2B context. Researchers have provided relatively few insights into the effective implementation of market strategies within B2B firms (e.g., Beverland & Lindgreen, 2007; Kennedy, Goolsby, & Arnould, 2003; Taghian, 2010; van Raaij & Stoelhorst, 2008), thus there is also a broader interest in how market strategies may manifest themselves in these firms.

While the seminal paper on proactive market orientation by Narver et al. (2004)—together with continued research into this area—has shed light on the impact of proactivity on various measures of firm performance, there have been few, if any, thorough studies of how proactivity enables firms to achieve this superior value creation. The lack of studies focusing on implementation is one of the potentially weaker points of market orientation literature in general (as pointed out by e.g. Kennedy et al., 2003; Beverland & Lindgreen, 2007), and a

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similar situation has arisen in the proactivity field. Understanding how firms can act, and what they can focus on, in the pursuit of proactivity is thus an important part of improving our understanding of how firms can unlock the value-creating potential of proactivity. Correspondingly, the objective of this study is to explore proactive market strategies, and the associated firm activities performed, in order to further our understanding of proactivity, and how it is translated into a firm setting.

Some authors have investigated proactive approaches to managing B2B markets, such as market shaping (e.g., Elg et al., 2012; Kindström et al., 2018; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2015) or approaching customers' customers (e.g., Dahlquist & Griffith, 2014; Homburg, Wilczek, & Hahn, 2014), yet they have not targeted the broader nature of proactivity in a B2B marketing context. The potential that proactivity has to enable B2B firms to achieve superior performance means that gaining a greater understanding of how these particular firms can unlock the value-creating potential of proactivity becomes a priority issue in B2B research (Kindström et al., 2018).

Furthermore, literature on proactivity in a marketing context tends to use an implicit definition of the concept that is primarily focused around the identification and satisfaction of customers' latent and future needs (Atuahene-Gima, Slater, & Olson, 2005; Narver et al., 2004). This can be contrasted with the more nuanced views of proactivity seen in the organizational behavior literature (e.g., Chan, 2006; Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008), where several aspects of proactive behavior not present in the implicit definition by e.g. Narver et al. (2004) can be seen. Thus, in order to better understand how B2B firms can obtain and utilize the potential benefits of proactivity, a more comprehensive definition of proactive behavior in a market-strategic context is needed.

To increase our understanding of proactive market strategies, we must first clearly define the notion of proactivity. To do so, we begin by expanding the concept to the firm-level strategic context. We then conduct a multiple case study to increase our understanding of what proactivity entails from a market strategy perspective. This results in a definition of proactivity in a market-strategic context wherein proactive firms are future-oriented, take the initiative, and drive change (Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Narver et al., 2004). Our research promotes a more nuanced picture of B2B firms' proactivity in managing their markets, revealing three generic types of proactive market strategies: (1) market-shaping strategies, (2) customer engagement strategies, and (3) technology leadership strategies.

We contribute to the literature on proactivity and market strategy by providing a concrete and useful definition of proactivity as it relates to firms' strategic behavior. We also identify proactivity profiles describing the proactive activities of successful proactive B2B firms, and from this propose three generic proactive market strategies. Our research finally provides a starting point for further investigations of the role of proactivity in enabling a successful market strategy.

2. Untangling proactivity in the marketing context

In a market environment that is increasingly characterized by rapidly changing technology and fierce global competition, firms must become more proactive in managing their customers' needs in order to be successful (Day, 2011; Narver et al., 2004; Tsai et al., 2008). This is especially true in the B2B domain, where customer needs are typically complex and firms must often perform a broader set of activities and create more complex solutions to ensure they can create superior customer value (Elg et al., 2012; Kindström et al., 2018; Tuominen et al., 2004). Flint et al. (2002, p. 115) emphasize the need for proactivity in order for B2B firms to "... actively influence changes in customers' desired value by helping customers interpret the changes in their environments [and] respond to those changes...", indicating the importance of proactivity for creating value in these situations. B2B markets typically include a more limited number of identifiable actors and are increasingly global with increasing competitive pressure. Due to this and the fact that B2B markets are developing through

interactions (see e.g. Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005), and as value creation resides in those interactions and relationships (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), the opportunities for B2B firms to be proactive are potentially more conducive, as well as more rewarding. Tsai et al. (2008), for example, find that higher proactivity brings greater benefit for firms launching new products in highly competitive and turbulent environments.

However, despite the apparent importance of proactivity, there is, to the best of our knowledge, no explicit definition of what proactive behavior in a marketing context entails. This is particularly so in a B2B context where proactivity could be seen to be increasingly relevant for the creation of a sustained competitive advantage (Flint et al., 2002; Narver et al., 2004). In order to broaden the scope of proactivity in marketing from just proactive market orientation, this section of the paper is dedicated to untangling the concept and providing a concise working definition of proactive behavior.

In the literature on proactivity within the field of organizational behavior, proactive actions have two distinguishing characteristics: First, they are taken in advance—in anticipation of future events—rather than as a reaction to events that have already happened (Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008). An event may stimulate both a reactive action and a proactive action, but the difference is that the reactive action is focused on the event that stimulated it, while the proactive action is focused on an anticipated future brought about by the event. The event was thus the catalyst that made the firm become aware of this anticipated future, but is not itself the focus of the proactive action. Therefore, proactive actions can be said to be future-oriented, while reactive actions are focused on the present.

Second, proactive actions are intended to bring about some change in the current situation, i.e. they are aimed at changing the status quo rather than reinforcing it (Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). Reactive actions certainly also effect some change, but the difference is that reactive actions tend towards minor change within the status quo, while proactive actions tend towards major change and upsetting the status quo. For example, a reactive firm might create a customized solution for a customer in response to new demands, while a more proactive firm might realize this need exists latently within a wider range of customers and develop not just a customized solution, but an entirely new offering based on this new knowledge.

Within the marketing literature, Narver et al. (2004) further propose that proactivity is linked to creativity and innovation through the conceptualization of a proactive market orientation. With a proactive market orientation, proactivity enables firms to identify customers' latent needs and create novel solutions that focus on those needs (e.g., Atuahene-Gima et al., 2005; Li, Lin, & Chu, 2008; Tsai et al., 2008).

By combining the organizational behavior perspective on proactivity with the insights from the marketing literature, we propose the following working definition: *Proactivity in the B2B marketing context refers to firms being future-oriented, taking the initiative, and driving change* (Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; Flint et al., 2002; Narver et al., 2004; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010; Kindström et al., 2018). The three behavioral characteristics highlighted in our definition are described in more detail in Table 1.

These three behavioral characteristics of proactivity provide a framework for analyzing firms' activities with respect to proactivity and evaluating the overall level of proactivity in a firm's market strategies. It is important to note that this is not binary—a firm is not either proactive or not proactive—but rather that firms that perform more activities that exhibit some or all of these characteristics and put greater emphasis on these activities will be more proactive than those that only perform a few activities or where the activities are not of significance for the firm. In this sense, proactivity is perceived as a concept relative to competition as well as previous behavior in the respective firm.

Notably, proactivity does not necessarily lead to success. Chan (2006) finds that proactivity's positive impact on goal achievement is

Table 1
Characteristics of proactivity in a B2B marketing context.

Characteristic	Description
Being future-oriented	Crant (2000) emphasizes the need for a longer time horizon in decision-making, anticipating future events, and taking action to be well poised to either mitigate potential risks or exploit opportunities. Day (2011, p. 187) also proposes that firms need to develop capabilities to anticipate “trends and events before they are fully apparent and then [adapt] effectively”, further indicating the importance of having a future orientation. It is important to emphasize that this anticipation does not constitute guess-work; both Day (2011) and Chan (2006) stress the need for a good awareness of the situation, e.g. through evidence-based marketing, to achieve success using proactive approaches.
Taking the initiative	Frese and Fay (2001) emphasize being proactive through seizing the initiative and being the actor that initializes things. This characteristic emphasizes taking the initiative and working towards creating new opportunities rather than waiting for them to appear (Kindström et al., 2018). In the same vein, Narver et al. (2004) emphasize the need for firms not only to react to customers' expressed needs but (also) to gain a deeper understanding of their customers and being able to identify latent and future needs and act upon them.
Driving change	Anticipating important future events and taking the initiative is key but unless a firm also can drive, and manage, the necessary changes to improve a current situation, or to form more favorable future circumstances (Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008), benefits for a firm are limited. Kindström et al. (2018) and Storbacka and Nenonen (2015) emphasize the need for firms to be able to drive change in their environments, enabling them to e.g. shape their markets in line with preferable configurations.

heavily moderated by how well situations are understood; if a firm has a poor understanding of its current market situation, being proactive is likely to lead to worse results than not being proactive.

3. Understanding proactive market strategies through firm activities

In this study, the term ‘market strategy’ is used to refer to firms' strategies for creating and delivering customer value. A core principle of marketing is that firms need to deliver superior customer value in order to achieve superior business performance (Kotler & Armstrong, 2005), meaning that firms' value-creating market strategies are at the center of their efforts to become more successful.

The formation of a market strategy in a firm is guided by that firm's idea of how to create value for customers and thereby become successful. As such it is often multifaceted, in that a firm typically deems multiple aspects to be important in order to achieve success. These aspects can, in this context, be referred to as a firm's choice of strategic orientations (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997), and as such represent favored directions in a firm's creation of competitive advantage and in creating customer value (Noble, Sinha, & Kumar, 2002). A strategic orientation will influence the core thrust of the firm's market strategies and those market strategies are implemented through various activities performed by the firm (Mintzberg, 1987; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). As pointed out by Gatignon and Xuereb (1997), a firm often has multiple such strategic orientations, combining to influence a firm's strategies.

To put it succinctly: the combination of strategic orientations influences the formation of market strategies, which are then implemented through a firm's activities (see Fig. 1).

To understand how proactive market strategies can create customer value, we can thus start with how a firm's strategic orientations shape value creation and the associated activities. This study uses three previously identified strategic orientations—Customer orientation (e.g., Deshpandé, Farley, & Webster, 1993; Narver & Slater, 1990), Competition orientation (e.g., Armstrong & Collopy, 1996; Elg et al., 2012; Kim & Mauborgne, 2004; Porter, 1980), and Innovation orientation (e.g., Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao, 2002; Hurley & Hult, 1998)—that are well-established as value creation drivers (see e.g. Narver & Slater, 1990; Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997; Olson, Slater, & Hult, 2005; Slater, Hult & Olson, 2007) as the foundation of a conceptual structuring framework in order to aid in the identification of proactive market strategies.

These three strategic orientations represent three approaches to creating customer value and act as underlying thrusts driving a firm's market strategies in particular directions (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997; Noble et al., 2002). They are linked to external market environments (customer and competition orientation) and the creation of new market offerings (innovation orientation), which are in turn linked to value creation through the activities they emphasize (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997; Olson et al., 2005).

3.1. Customer-oriented activities

The foremost concern of market-oriented firms is to identify and satisfy customer needs (Narver & Slater, 1990), so their activities focus on the generation and organizational dissemination of market intelligence about customers' needs and attentive responses to those needs (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Proactive firms go beyond the expressed needs of their customers to find latent, unarticulated needs; they estimate how those needs will evolve over time and anticipate future needs (Narver et al., 2004). The main objective of firms' customer-oriented market strategies is to find the best ways to serve customers (Deshpandé et al., 1993).

3.2. Competition-oriented activities

The primary concern of competition-oriented strategies is to serve customers better than the competition. Strategies that are strongly focused on competition may be detrimental to firm performance, though, because firms that focus too much on benchmarking against competitors (e.g., constantly measuring market share) tend to be less profitable (Armstrong & Collopy, 1996). However, there is more to a competition orientation than benchmarking; competition-oriented strategies focus on finding ways to improve firms' competitiveness by adapting to, or influencing, the market environment (e.g., Day, 2011; Elg et al., 2012; Narver & Slater, 1990). As authors such as Porter (1980) demonstrate, firms can improve their performance by finding market niches with less competition or better capability fit; improved awareness of the competitive environment can support a firm's efforts to serve its customers. Strategies that are proactively competition-oriented take a more dynamic view of the market and strive to either shape the market environment to firms' benefits (e.g., Elg et al., 2012; Jaworski, Kohli, & Sahay, 2000; Kindström et al., 2018) or create entirely new markets by innovating their market offerings (e.g., Kim & Mauborgne, 2004).



Fig. 1. The linkages between strategic orientations, market strategy, and firm activities.

3.3. Innovation-oriented activities

Firms employ innovation-oriented market strategies to deliver superior customer value through novel and innovative market offerings (Hurley & Hult, 1998). It is not enough for firms to identify customers' needs; they must also respond to that information and find ways to satisfy those needs (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Firms require innovation-oriented market strategies that focus on their innovative efforts to develop and deploy market offerings that provide superior customer value (Calantone et al., 2002). Proactive firms that strive to combine an innovation focus with attention to customer needs are more likely to achieve high innovation performance (Stock & Zacharias, 2011). Firms can create different types of innovations (e.g., Christensen & Bower, 1996) to satisfy the expressed and latent needs of their customers; those that are more proactive focus their efforts on discontinuous innovations (Li et al., 2008; Tan & Liu, 2014) and take both explorative and exploitative approaches to innovation (Herhausen, 2016; March, 1991).

3.4. A framework for studying proactive market strategies

Since a firm's market strategies will be influenced by its combination of strategic orientations (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997; Noble et al., 2002), these orientations will also guide the activities a firm chooses to perform. This makes it possible to gain insight into a firm's market strategies—and the strategic orientations that influence them—through studying the performed firm activities. Consequently, the combination of strategic orientations that drive a proactive firm will influence the way its market strategies are formed, resulting in proactive market strategies, where proactive activities play an integral part in the creation of customer value. We do not perceive proactivity as a strategic orientation of its own but rather as a behavior influencing the way a firm performs its activities. This is similar to the way proactivity is approached by Narver et al. (2004), who do not view proactivity as an added orientation in the market orientation construct, but rather as something that influences the way firms translate their customer orientation and competitor orientation into concrete firm activities.

Since relatively little is known—as established in the research gap and mirrored in the research aim—regarding proactivity in market strategies, a structuring framework is needed to make sense of, and to categorize, data in order to allow patterns, i.e. proactive market strategies, to emerge. Research on strategic orientations provides a starting point, and an overarching framework, giving us insights into the fundamental thrusts influencing firm activities that enable a structure to emerge. In conjunction with the proactivity concept, this provided us

with the analytical framework needed for our research, as shown in Fig. 2 above.

4. Methodology

Since our aim was to generate new theory on proactive market strategies, and to identify and explore context-bound and embedded proactive activities within B2B firms, we chose to conduct a qualitative multiple case study (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). This approach enabled us to understand not only proactive market strategies but also their contexts and content, as well as to identify the activities that comprise them. It also allowed us to investigate firms' motivations for employing certain types of proactive market strategies and helped us better understand how firms can match their proactive market strategies to their different strategic imperatives.

As in any case study, our selection of cases was key (Sigelkow, 2007; Yin, 2009). We used a theoretical sampling process to purposefully select certain B2B firms (Patton, 2014) that ensured we could study the phenomenon of proactivity in market strategies. We applied four criteria to ensure that our cases revealed insights into proactive market strategies (Yin, 2009):

- (1) The firms are B2B-oriented and had well-defined market strategies according to self-evaluations carried out by firm managers during initial discussions.
- (2) The firms performed some type of proactive activities and had been successful in employing proactive market strategies, according to self-evaluations by firm managers, related to competition as well as financial performance. They all exhibited a number of proactivity characteristics stemming from our definition of proactive behavior. Proactivity is thus here seen as a relative concept vis-à-vis our definition and is not gauged in absolute terms.
- (3) The firms achieved good (i.e., above average) business performance relative to their industry, indicating that their market strategies were relatively successful, according to revenue growth and profitability comparisons with competitors and industry in general.
- (4) The firms were accessible (i.e., provided in-depth access to multiple key informants). (This criterion limited the number of potential case firms but was important for ensuring in-depth access to data.)

The three first criteria ensured that our case firms fit the theoretical framework of our study (e.g., Seawright & Gerring, 2008), assuming that the firms were successful in their proactivity efforts. The fourth criterion allowed us to gather relevant information about firms'

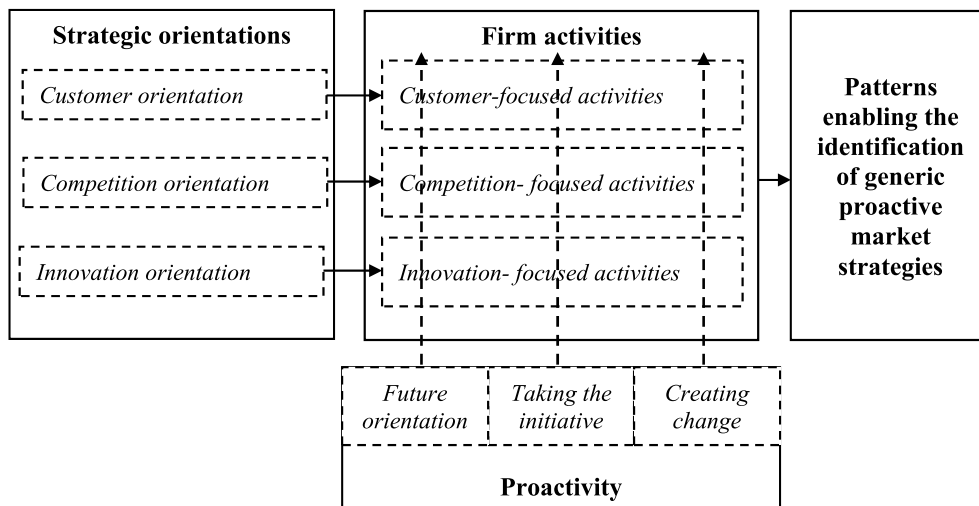


Fig. 2. Conceptual structuring framework for the study.

Table 2
Case firm overview

Case firm	Main business	Main driver of proactivity	No. of interviews
1. Automated Waste Collection	Waste collection systems	Need to stimulate recognition of, and global demand for, its products	Five (Chief Executive Officer [CEO], Chairman of the Board, Marketing Director, Chief Technology Officer [CTO], Regional Sales Director)
2. Industrial Solutions Group	Industrial systems and related services	Need to increase competitiveness across several highly competitive product segments	Five (Marketing & Sales Director, two Product Area Managers, two Regional Sales Managers)
3. IoT Platform	Software (platform) and consulting	Need to achieve rapid firm growth in a competitive emerging market	Five (CEO, Chairman of the Board, Chief Operating Officer [COO], Chief Financial Officer [CFO], CTO)
4. Education & Services	Education and training services	Need to create competitive market offerings and influence stakeholder perception	Five (CEO, Chairman of the Board, Chief Marketing Officer [CMO], Product Manager, Project Leader)
5. Custom Product Solutions	Product development services and production	Need to maximize customer value by developing customized solutions	Five (CEO, COO, Chief Information Officer [CIO], Production Manager, Project Leader)

strategic choices and considerations. To ensure diversity, we also selected cases from a variety of B2B industries and sizes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Although we selected our case firms according to their successful use of proactive market strategies, our study does not evaluate whether proactivity in market strategy leads to success; rather, it identifies which activities the firms performed as part of their proactive market strategies.

4.1. Empirical context

Table 2 below presents our five case firms (anonymized for confidentiality reasons) and their main drivers of proactivity, which we identified during our initial discussions with the firms.

In accordance with Criterion 3, we confirmed that all case firms were performing above the industry average in at least two of the following three measures of financial performance, measured over the period of 2012 to 2016: (1) compound annual growth rate (CAGR), (2) average profit margin, and (3) return on capital employed (ROCE). Finally, to enable a broader exploration of proactive strategies (Patton, 2014; Seawright & Gerring, 2008), we checked that the case firms were active in business-to-business (B2B) markets and represented diverse industries.

4.2. Data collection

We collected data from a series of semi-structured interviews (1–2 h in length), conducting five interviews at each case firm. Interviewees held management positions in various areas and expressed diverse viewpoints, as well as high levels of knowledge about market proactivity in their respective firms. The diversity of respondents increased the level of data triangulation (i.e., by allowing corroboration across multiple sources; Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008), thereby increasing the validity of our research (Yin, 2009).

In the interviews, we investigated actual actions rather than intentions, by focusing on concrete market-strategic activities that firms performed. However, motivations for proactivity are also important (Bateman & Crant, 1999), so we addressed activity rationales and consequences, as perceived by respondents. Their diverse perspectives and high levels of knowledge provided us with an improved, broadened understanding of how firms approach and implement proactivity (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989).

During the interviews, we used an interview guide, which we developed based on the theoretical framework. Our choice of semi-structured interviews ensured that interviewees had the freedom to discuss the most interesting and relevant areas from their own perspectives, while still ensuring that all relevant areas were covered (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). We slightly altered the interview guide across interviews to ensure that the topics and questions fit the managerial roles of the interviewees. Our use of a formal interview guide further increased the study's reliability (Yin, 2009).

4.3. Data analysis

Market strategies, as the embodiment of a firm's orientations, contain both pre-planned and emergent elements (e.g., Mintzberg & Waters, 1985); they are manifested as sets of activities carried out by firms. To identify the market strategies that firms employ, we took firms' actual activities as our starting point, and structured them using the three dimensions of the strategic orientation framework. Individually coding (i.e., open and axial coding) the interviews for content (i.e., activities) and reading them in relation to one another allowed us to detect general patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the interviews, respondents reported firm activities and linked them to firms' market strategies. We then evaluated the identified activities for proactivity and thus determined the proactive market strategies of each firm. Tables A1–A5 present the proactive market strategies, proactive activities, and consequences of each case firm (see the Appendix), along with illustrative quotations from the interviews.

Following the methodological lead of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2009), we carried out our analysis and interpretation as a two-stage process, starting with within-case examinations and moving to cross-case comparisons. We generated the findings iteratively, by switching sequentially between empirical results and theoretical inputs (abduction) (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This structured approach enhanced the validity and robustness of the results (Yin, 2009).















Two researchers separately coded the interviews and later shared and compared research notes. Through extensive discussions of the findings and a common view of the case firms, market strategies, and activities, they established their purposes (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). We used workshops with the firms to ensure the quality of the preliminary analyses (Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 1998), and also made use of “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to validate the analysis, ensuring that our interpretations of the interviews were reasonable, and confirming that we had correctly understood the strategies and focuses of the firms.



As expected, we found differences among the case firms with regard to the degree of proactivity of their activities and strategies. By using these differences, we gauged the proactivity of activities in each orientation as “not proactive,” “proactive,” or “highly proactive,” according to the intensity and frequency of the proactive activities and to what degree the interviewees emphasized the importance of proactive activities.

5. Proactive profiling for market strategies

In this section, we present the main proactive activities, the strategic foci, as well as the objectives identified for each case firm. This is empirically derived from the empirical data through within-case analyses. Although all of the firms exhibit proactivity in their activities and in the market strategies linked to those activities, they do so in different ways. As a consequence, Table 3 shows that the case firms have different proactivity profiles as their set of proactive activities differ from

Table 3
Proactivity profiles of the case firms.

<i>Case</i>	<i>Customer orientation</i>	<i>Competition orientation</i>	<i>Innovation orientation</i>
Case 1: Automated Waste Collection			
Case 2: Industrial Solutions Group			
Case 3: IoT Platform			
Case 4: Education & Services			
Case 5: Custom Product Solutions		X	

X Not proactive  Proactive  Highly proactive

each other and span several orientations.

We profiled the case firms according to the exhibited set of activities, with the help of the structuring framework (see Fig. 2). To create the proactivity profiles, we evaluated the degree of proactivity of the activities and analyzed the intensity/amount of effort that top managers put into the activities. Therefore, the levels of proactivity in the profile represent an aggregation of the number of activities, the proactivity of these activities, and the amount of effort and focus they attract.

The tables in the Appendix summarize the proactive activities of each case firm.

5.1. Case firm 1: Automated waste collection

The proactive market strategies of Automated Waste Collection (AWC) focus on winning market share from more traditional waste collectors and continuously developing systems to deliver better customer value. The focus on winning market share takes the form of a wide array of activities aimed at influencing key stakeholders in target markets to build recognition and stimulate future demand. In this way, AWC's approach is similar to the proactive market-shaping approach described by Elg et al. (2012) and Kindström et al. (2018). To create customer value, AWC focuses on customer-side stakeholders, making them aware of their latent needs and showing them how the firm's waste collection systems can satisfy these needs. This behavior reflects both Narver et al.'s (2004) discussion of proactivity and March's (1991) characterization of the ambidextrous approach to innovation; it combines proactive and responsive approaches to customers (e.g., Herhausen, 2016). However, most of the firm's innovation efforts focus on incremental innovation, which is not strongly linked to proactivity (Li et al., 2008). Overall, AWC is highly proactive with regard to activities driven by competition orientation, which is consistent with the firm's emphasis on market-shaping strategy; it is less proactive with regard to activities driven by customer orientation and innovation orientation.

5.2. Case firm 2: Industrial solutions group

The proactive market strategies of Industrial Solutions Group (ISG) focus on strengthening the firm's competitiveness across several product segments, in a context of fierce global competition and rapid development. The firm emphasizes the development of new products and systems, especially in segments in which competitors are relatively weak. The firm's innovation-orientation-driven activities include extensive R&D work to ensure that new and innovative technologies are

developed and incorporated in the firm's market offerings. This focus on more radical innovation is consistent with proactive behavior (Li et al., 2008). The firm also collaborates with key customers through partnerships to ensure that it understands customer needs, both expressed and latent, consistent with a proactive customer orientation (Narver et al., 2004). Such collaboration facilitates the firm's development of latent solutions to customer needs, further strengthening the proactivity of the firm's customer-oriented and innovation-oriented activities (Li et al., 2008; Narver et al., 2004). With regard to competitor orientation, the firm often uses a second-mover strategy (e.g., Hoppe, 2000); it gauges the state of competitors' product development by acquiring and reverse-engineering competitors' products. These actions, along with generating market intelligence, allow the firm to focus its innovation efforts on actions that create the greatest increase in competitive advantage. This approach is consistent with an ambidextrous approach to market opportunities and thus includes proactive elements (March 1992; Li et al., 2008; Herhausen, 2016). Overall, ISG is highly proactive in activities driven by customer and innovation orientation, consistent with its strategy of producing superior offerings for customers; it is less proactive with regard to competition orientation.

5.3. Case firm 3: IoT platform

The proactive market strategies of IoT Platform (IoTP) focus on achieving rapid firm growth in an emerging market. The firm uses the high agility and low cost base gained from its relatively small organization and closeness to mid-sized customers to create an offering with a highly competitive price-performance point. With regard to innovation, IoTP focuses on the ongoing development of an open IoT platform that connects and controls IoT devices from any manufacturer. This development is agile and highly attentive to customer needs, both current and anticipated. This customer-driven approach to product development is consistent with proactivity (Narver et al., 2004). The firm's main way of managing competition is to out-manuever (mostly much larger) competitors. The firm creates open platform offerings that help customers avoid being locked in; its strategy of creating offerings that evade competition is a proactive way to deal with stronger competitors (e.g., Kim & Mauborgne, 2004; Porter, 1980). Overall, IoTP is highly proactive in activities that are driven by innovation orientation, which is consistent with its strategy of decreasing competition by developing sufficiently powerful solutions at low price points; it is less proactive in terms of customer orientation and competition orientation.

5.4. Case firm 4: Education & Services

The proactive market strategies of Education & Services (E&S) focus on creating competitive educational programs and improving public opinion of the private school sector. The firm emphasizes collaborative efforts with many important stakeholders in industry, academia, and local government, along with significant innovation in deploying new education technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning. To ensure that its content is relevant, the firm collaborates extensively with industrial and academic partners. This collaboration allows it to tailor its offerings to the needs and demands of the market and identify and satisfy the expressed and latent needs of customers, consistent with a proactive approach (Narver et al., 2004). By successfully introducing new innovations to its offerings (e.g., education-oriented technologies), at a speed that greatly outpaces competitors, the firm takes a proactive approach to innovation-oriented and competitor-oriented activities (Li et al., 2008; Narver et al., 2004). To manage competition, the firm creates favorable public opinion by attending to matters that are important to both decision-makers and customers. By gaining such favorable attention, the firm decreases competitors' opportunities to steal customers, which is consistent with a proactive approach (Kim & Mauborgne, 2004). Overall, E&S is highly proactive in activities driven by customer orientation, in line with its strategy of providing customers with a superior offering; it is less proactive in terms of customer orientation and competition orientation.

5.5. Case firm 5: Custom product solutions

The proactive market strategies of Custom Product Solutions (CPS) focus on the need to deliver superior customer value through custom solutions. The firm must understand customer situations and problems and have the domain knowledge necessary to develop superior custom solutions. Accordingly, CPS is highly focused on understanding customer problems and developing innovative solutions for solving them, using customers as important partners in the process. Through this process of collaborative problem analysis and solution development, CPS ensures that its innovative solutions satisfy the expressed and latent needs of customers. The firm's focus on latent needs and latent solutions is consistent with a proactive approach to innovation and engaging customers (Li et al., 2008; Narver et al., 2004). Moreover, by ensuring that it understands how customer needs develop over time, and remaining open to new projects, CPS maintains long relationships with its customers, which is consistent with a proactive approach to customers (Narver et al., 2004). However, the firm is passive, rather than proactive, in its management of competitors. Overall, CPS is highly proactive with regard to activities driven by customer orientation and innovation orientation, consistent with its strategy of developing innovative custom solutions to customer problems; it is not proactive in terms of competition orientation.

6. Three generic approaches to proactive market strategies

Although all case firms performed different proactive activities, influenced by the three strategic orientations and indicated by the conceptual framework, patterns arose when analyzing the sets of activities across multiple strategic orientations. These combined sets of activities led to three, what we term, “generic proactive market strategies”. A generic strategy, in this case, refers to a set of coordinated proactive activities influenced by multiple strategic orientations (see Table 4).

As an illustrative example, AWC, with its primary strategic goal of increasing awareness and stimulating demand for its automated vacuum collection (AVAC) technology, primarily performs proactive activities aimed at influencing various actors involved with the waste collection market. In our framework, these activities are categorized as competition-oriented as this effort was designed to increase the

competitiveness of AVAC. However, these competition-oriented efforts are, in the AWC case, tightly coordinated with a complementary set of proactive customer-oriented activities. The combined proactive activities (from the two sets discussed) were tightly coupled and each set is necessary in order to be successful, and the coordination of the activities is essential in order to succeed with the strategy. This leads to the emergence of the generic proactive market strategy called market shaping (see also e.g. Elg et al., 2012; Kindström et al., 2018).

The multidimensional character identified through the empirical sets of proactive activities indicates that it is necessary to take a broader perspective on proactivity, also highlighting the need to look at the coordination of activities from multiple orientations in order to identify the complexity of proactive market strategies. Through this, three generic market strategies emerged: market shaping, customer engagement, and technology leadership (see Table 4). These generic proactive market strategies (also compare with the idea of generic competitive strategies in Porter, 1985), represent archetypal approaches to achieving business success (e.g. Miles & Snow, 1978) through proactivity.

- (1) **Market shaping** oriented strategies are primarily competition-oriented with a complement of customer-oriented activities. This strategy has a focus on activities aimed at shaping the market environment, customers' preferences, and expectations in its favor, thereby enabling the firm to create superior customer value.
- (2) **Customer engagement** oriented strategies are primarily customer-oriented with a complement of innovation-oriented activities. This strategy has a focus on activities aimed at providing customers with higher value through a superior understanding of their needs, including latent needs, and the development of novel offerings to satisfy those needs.
- (3) **Technology leadership** oriented strategies are primarily innovation-oriented with a complement of competition-oriented activities. This strategy has a focus on activities aimed at improving the firm's ability to deliver higher customer value by using its superior innovation capabilities not only to develop new offerings, but also to guide the technological and business development of the industry.







6.1. Market-shaping strategies



Proactive market-shaping strategies refers to firms' strategies for influencing customers, suppliers, and other market actors in order to strengthen their own ability to deliver superior customer value and decrease their competitors' ability, thereby gaining competitive advantage (Elg et al., 2012; Kindström et al., 2018; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2015). The primary means of improving performance using a market-shaping strategy is not through direct competition or a focus on customers, but through efforts to shape the structure of the market (e.g. influencing customer preferences and/or expectations of what a supplier can do for them, market institutions, and other market stakeholders) and creating a favorable market position that emphasizes the firm's own strengths while de-emphasizing the competitors' (Kindström et al., 2018; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2015).

The strength of a market-shaping strategy stems from the combination of proactive activities aimed at changing the market structure (a competition orientation) and customer-focused activities (a customer orientation) that give the firm great insights into the (latent) needs of current and potential customers. Combining these two, the market-shaping firm can shape niches and entire markets in ways that greatly emphasize how that particular firm can best create customer value. Less proactive competitors that attempt to shape the market without integrating activities aimed at understanding the customers are less likely to be able to find a sweet spot that emphasizes both customer needs and firm capabilities, while also being able to nudge the market in the right direction to be able to grasp this opportunity.

Table 4

Relationships between the generic proactive market strategies and the strategic orientations.

<i>Generic proactive market strategy</i>	<i>Customer orientation</i>	<i>Competition orientation</i>	<i>Innovation orientation</i>
Market shaping			
Customer engagement			
Technology leadership			

 Primary focus of proactive activities
  Complementary focus of proactive activities

6.2. Customer engagement strategies

Proactive customer engagement strategies refers to strategies for building intimate relationships with customers to gain insights into their needs and the capabilities needed to create offerings that provide customers with superior value, thereby gaining competitive advantage (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Kumar, Rajan, Gupta, & Pozza, 2017; Narver et al., 2004; Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010). The primary means of improving performance through a customer engagement strategy is through using close relationships to gain superior insight into the needs of the customers, not only their expressed needs but also their latent needs and the development of future needs (Narver et al., 2004). This insight is then coupled with an innovative focus on being able to create the solutions that can best satisfy those needs, creating a situation where customers gain superior value from the firm's offerings due to the excellent fit between the customers' needs and the firm's solutions (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Narver et al., 2004).

The strength of a customer engagement strategy stems from the combination of customer-focused proactive activities (a customer orientation) aimed at gaining a better understanding of customer needs with the innovation-oriented activities (a technology orientation) that enable the firm to create novel and well-fitting solutions to those needs. Building closer, collaborative relationships with customers is an important activity in bringing about a situation where no competitor can simply create an offering that can provide a similar value. Less proactive competitors that lack the integrated innovation activities can perhaps gain the same level of insight into customer circumstances, but will not be able to develop offerings that can fully leverage this information. Innovative competitors without the customer insights are similarly less likely to be able to create solutions that will achieve the same fit with the customers' needs.

6.3. Technology leadership strategies

Proactive technology leadership strategies refers to strategies for developing more disruptive innovations as well as a firm's ability to continuously innovate in order to shape dominant designs and novel business models for the market, forcing competition to follow (Christensen & Bower, 1996; Zahra, 1996; Zahra & Covin, 1993). This type of strategy, as opposed to e.g. market shaping, emphasizes changing the market through leading the development of technological innovations and new business models. It enables proactive firms to launch potentially disruptive innovations and use architectural innovations to upset the status quo in the market, using their strong position to continue leading the development of the market (Henderson & Clark, 1990; Li et al., 2008). Depending on the firm's relative strength or weakness in a technological area, they use first-mover or second-mover strategies to best take advantage of their own capabilities and the movements of competitors (Kerin, Varadarajan, & Peterson, 1992; Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). Thus, proactive firms can ensure that competitors

get stuck trying to catch up, thereby gaining competitive advantage (Kim & Mauborgne, 2006; Argyles, Bigelow, & Nickerson, 2015).

The primary strength of the technology leadership strategy stems from a focus on innovation-oriented activities (a technology orientation) focused on developing new technology and business models that are integrated with a competition-oriented focus (a competition orientation) on gaining insight into the capabilities of competitors and the market development. This allows the proactive firm to lead the development of new technology in an industry, hampering competitors' efforts to catch up or create solutions to the customers' needs. Less proactive competitors lacking the same customer insights will typically struggle to gain an advantage as they are not as focused on addressing actual customer problems, while competitors with less focus on innovation will struggle to capitalize on their customer insights.

7. Conclusions

The objective of this study is to explore proactive market strategies and the associated activities. Since proactivity has a great potential to improve the performance of B2B firms (e.g. Kindström et al., 2018; Narver et al., 2004), it is important to understand how firms can be proactive. Existing literature tends to overlook this and does not sufficiently delve into the activities that proactive firms perform to gain the benefits promised by proactivity. In investigating these issues, this study presents three main contributions.

First, it proposes a working definition of proactivity in a market-strategic context as a firm's behavior that is initiative-taking, future-oriented, and change-inducing. By moving away from the overly customer-oriented description of proactivity present in previous research (primarily in Narver et al., 2004 and the proactive market orientation literature stream that followed, but also in e.g. Flint et al., 2002) towards a more comprehensive definition that is based on behavioral characteristics, this research provides an expanded and more nuanced understanding of what proactivity is and what forms it can take. This added nuance makes it possible to broaden the scope of proactive activities, with particular focus on proactivity in activities that are not customer-focused. Thus, we are better positioned to understand the value-creation potential in a wider range of proactive strategies, such as e.g. market shaping (see e.g. Elg et al., 2012; Kindström et al., 2018; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2015).

Our definition encompasses developments in the organizational behavior field (e.g. by Crant, 2000; Chan, 2006; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010), where proactivity has been studied in more detail, and in market orientation (e.g. by Narver et al., 2004; Atuahene-Gima et al., 2005), thus taking the different foci of the organizational behavior research and the marketing research into consideration. Furthermore, the definition also opens up the concept for construct development, as well as more empirically oriented future research.

Second, the paper broadens the understanding of the implementation of market strategies at the firm level. The complex customer needs

and deeper relationships (e.g. Håkansson & Snedota, 1995; Flint et al., 2002; Tuominen et al., 2004) that B2B firms face imply that there may exist a substantial value-creating potential in becoming more proactive (e.g. Elg et al., 2012; Kindström et al., 2018), but there are no studies investigating what firms should do to be proactive. By conceptualizing proactive market strategies as activities carried out by firms, categorized in three dimensions, we make use of a tentative structuring framework based on the strategic orientations that drive market strategies. Although this framework has been studied previously (e.g., Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997; Olson et al., 2005), this research offers an interpretation that structures the activities involved in implementing a market strategy and shows that many strategies require a coordination of activities driven by multiple orientations to be successful. By categorizing activities according to their driving strategic orientations and showing how the case firms implement their proactive market strategies, we exemplify how proactive firms become proactive through a coordinated effort on different levels, and in different parts, of the firm. This mirrors Narver and Slater's (1990) call for inter-organizational coordination in developing a market orientation, but also broadens that view by pointing out that innovation-oriented activities are an integral part of a firm's market strategies (see e.g. Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997).

Third, we offer a more nuanced discussion of how proactivity is manifested in different B2B firms, conceptualized as three generic proactive market strategies. We find that firms approach proactivity differently, resulting in unique proactivity profiles. These profiles reflect the different sets of proactive activities the firms perform as they implement their respective proactive market strategies. From these profiles, generic proactive market strategies emerge, describing archetypal sets of coordinated proactive activities across different strategic orientations. Our results thus indicate that in order for B2B firms to harness the potential of proactivity, through the implementation of proactive market strategies, they must not only perform proactive activities but also coordinate different proactive activities that can be driven by multiple strategic orientations.

Furthermore, proactivity in itself exhibits equifinality traits (Doty, Glick & Huber, 1993), such that there seem to be several, potentially equally successful, ways to approach proactivity, depending on firm circumstances and external contingencies. The introduction of generic proactive market strategies is a key aspect of this research and can enable the emergence of new insights into how B2B firms can develop their market strategies, and which activities to perform, in order to realize the potential that proactivity holds. These concepts offer both academic and practitioner-oriented insights providing new knowledge as well as opening up new avenues for future research.

Through these three contributions, this paper provides an exploration of proactive market strategies that manages to: (1) clarify what proactivity entails in a market-strategic B2B context, (2) conceptualize proactive market strategies and explicitly link them to B2B firm activities, and (3) discuss the multifaceted nature of the successful proactive

approaches exhibited by the case firms. Thus, we provide a deeper understanding of both market strategies and proactivity in a B2B context, demonstrating that the B2B firms do employ multiple proactive activities that are coordinated across functions, in order to achieve their market-strategic goals. In doing so, this paper provides a starting point for further investigations and construct developments into proactivity and market strategies, which was the objective of doing exploratory research.

7.1. Future research and limitations

There are several interesting avenues for research, including a deeper study of the proposed generic proactive market strategies (e.g., studying interaction effects between the different strategies, investigating both success-promoting and limiting factors for the firm activities and for proactive activities in general). More quantitative approaches to studying proactive market strategies and their direct effects (e.g., on various performance parameters) could also be insightful. It would be of great interest to determine the outcomes of proactivity. Finally, by contextualizing proactivity and exploring which factors influence various types of proactivity, and how their influence works, researchers could produce further insights, and practitioners could develop appropriate proactivity strategies.

In terms of limitations to our study, both the small number of cases and the nature of the case selection, though appropriate for a theory-generating study, lessen the generalizability of our results to other firms and contexts. Our study consists of five cases, and the themes that we find correspond to the dimensions proposed by our framework; it is possible, though, that other themes could emerge. Our results should be validated using larger data sets with firms that are not pre-screened for proactivity.

Our conclusions also reflect the interviewees, who were able (retrospectively) to discuss the activities their firms had performed and the consequences for their firms. Such self-evaluations of proactivity effects suffer some methodological challenges; however, because our research does not quantify causal links between proactivity and performance, as well as focusing on relative and not absolute levels of proactivity, these challenges are argued to be minimal. Nevertheless, to better understand the uses and impacts of proactivity, it would be fruitful to investigate the links, if any, between firms' activities and their consequences.

Declarations of interest

None.

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Appendix A. Proactive activities

Note: Activities are tagged FO for future-oriented, IT for initiative-taking, and DC for driving change. These are the primary proactive characteristics of that activity, as determined from the empirical study.

Table A1
Proactive activities of automated waste collection.

Area	Aim of proactive behavior	Key proactive activities	Consequence	Illustrative quotes
Customer Orientation	Creating superior value by working with customers to better understand their needs	Managing complex customer situations (FO, DC)	Creating differentiated value for each type of customer-side stakeholder	"It is important to understand what's in it for each of these types...they don't always know it themselves."
		Maintaining relationships with customers (FO, IT)	Creating satisfied customers that act as references for new projects, facilitating future systems sales	"Now, these [new customers] know of us; when they need a new system, they just say: 'we want [case firm's] solutions'."
		Collaboration with key customers (DC)	Giving a better understanding of evolving customer needs	"The collaboration with these experienced users is great... and then we could make [new product] together."
Competition Orientation	Taking market share from traditional waste collection by highlighting the benefits of AVAC technology	Taking a long-term approach to influencing stakeholders (FO, IT, DC) Encouraging more competition (FO, DC)	Increasing global recognition of AVaC technology and stimulating demand in target markets Increasing growth rate for the market by having more firms work with increasing recognition of the technology	"It's all about talking to people. This can take five [to] fifteen years, but if you want new projects, you have to do it." "We need more serious competitors...I would like it if we lost a third of our market share but could double the size of the pie."
Innovation Orientation	Maintaining leading position in the industry by developing new technology that satisfies latent customer needs	Ensuring customer-needs-driven development (DC) Practicing ambidextrous product development (FO, IT)	Creating new system features that satisfy customers' latent needs Creating new systems that deliver a combination of requested improvements and new features that customers did not know they wanted	"The thing customers will be needing is IoT, to access system data and to optimize operations through better control." "The most important thing for most customers is energy cost, but we also have to put in some extra stuff."

Table A2
Proactive activities of Industrial Solutions Group.

Area	Aim of proactive behavior	Key proactive activities	Consequence	Illustrative quotes
Customer Orientation	Collaborating with customers to ensure that the firm's solutions provide superior customer value	Establishing partnerships with key customers (IT, DC) Evaluating customer value on-site (IT)	Ensuring the firm has insight into needs of customers, enabling delivery of superior value Ensuring that solutions satisfy needs of customers and provide leads for future product development	"We partner with the most important [customers]. This helps us understand how the other customers will be in a few years." "I send in people to make sure [the system] works well, or else we'll tweak it to make sure it works as [the customer] wants."
Competition Orientation	Studying competitors and finding product segments where the firm can be most competitive	Closely studying competitors' products (FO) Prioritizing of product areas (FO)	Studying competitors' products to assess the competitiveness of their own products Reviewing capabilities of competitors to find product segments in which firm can deliver superior value and prioritize development	"I make sure we get our hands on competitors' products whenever we can... Really helps us understand what they can do compared to us." "We do actually have some areas where we know [the competitors] are better than us... better to just maintain a sufficient level there and focus where we can be best."
Innovation Orientation	Maintaining industry-leading position in technology to ensure high competitiveness of products	Undertaking extensive R&D work (IT, DC) Ensuring collaborative product development (FO, IT, DC)	Leading the industry in R&D and pushing technology push to give a competitive edge Collaborating with key customers to ensure that solutions satisfy customer needs	"Our R&D team is the best at what we're good at...It's about figuring out how to put the next generation tech into our products before competitors." "Working with these [customers] has really helped my engineers pinpoint the most important areas to improve in these [products and systems]."

Table A3
Proactive activities of IoT Platform.

Area	Aim of proactive behavior	Key proactive activities	Consequence	Illustrative quotes
Customer Orientation	Establishing relationships with customers to provide better value for them	Maintaining close relationships with important customers (FO, DC)	Ensuring that firm understands customer needs and needs evolution and can educate customers on needs	"If we talk to [these customers] we can figure out what they need. ...Then, we can help them understand what it is they really need."
Competition Orientation	Out-manuevering larger competitors to increase the firm's competitiveness	Helping customers avoid lock-in through an open, manufacturer-agnostic solution (IT, DC) Maintaining organizational agility in development teams and management of customers (FO, DC)	Recognizing that customers who are cautious of being locked in to a single manufacturer are more attracted to the firm's offerings Improving competitiveness compared with much larger competitors that cannot be as flexible at a low price	"[The customers] don't want to use a single manufacturer, they want to pick and choose...and we help them." "With these big competitors, we must be more flexible."
Innovation Orientation	Developing a platform with wide appeal that can deliver great customer value	Developing a manufacturer-agnostic platform (FO, DC) Ensuring customer-driven product development (IT, DC)	Increasing appeal for customers who want to avoid lock-in to a particular manufacturers' IoT products Ensuring that platform satisfies customer needs by involving the customer in the development process	"By linking together all products a customer has, no matter the manufacturer, we give [the customer] extra value." "When we see how these customers use the system we get insight for our programmers to continue development."

Table A4
Proactive activities of Education & Services.

Area	Aim of proactive behavior	Key proactive activities	Consequence	Illustrative quotes
Customer Orientation	Providing superior value for pupils, parents, industry, and municipalities through a new way of designing education	Working with industry to ensure relevance of educational content (FO, IT, DC)	Ensuring that pupils get relevant education for their future careers/continued education, benefiting both municipalities and future employers	"We base our educational activities on reality, and the future needs on the market so that our customers learn the right things. This creates more value for everyone..."
Competition Orientation	Creating a positive image for the firm's schools that improves competitiveness	Building positive public opinion of private schools (FO, IT, DC)	Ensuring that public opinion of private schools is high, making the firm's schools more attractive than public school competitors Improving competitiveness by creating expectations for collaboration with industry/academia in lower education	"It is of course important to make sure the public opinion of us is good, we want [customers] to come here rather than some other place." "If [customers] get used to how we work with industry, they won't want to go anywhere else."
Innovation Orientation	Implementing innovative solutions to improve teaching and learning	Shaping expectations of educational content (FO, DC) Leading national adoption of educational technology (IT, DC)	Ensuring the firm gains benefits from edu-tech before competitors, improving quality of both teaching and learning. Also giving the firm's schools a more progressive image among pupils and parents, increasing attractiveness	"Digitalization can...facilitate and improve our pedagogical offering and give our customers, as well as our employees, a better learning environment."

Table A5
Proactive activities of Custom Product Solutions.

Area	Aim of proactive behavior	Key proactive activities	Consequence	Illustrative quotes
Customer Orientation	Delivering superior value for customers through a superior understanding of their problems	Investigating customer problems (DC)	Enabling the firm to better understand the latent needs of and what creates value for their customers	“So we look at the problem they bring us and try to understand how we could solve that better than the current solution.”
Competition Orientation	<i>No significantly proactive market strategies found</i>	Maintaining deep customer relationships (FO, DC)	Ensuring the firm can continuously work with customers to develop new products for evolving needs	“We always maintain a close relationship with our customers, both so we can sell more to them and so we can take better care of them.”
Innovation Orientation	Developing innovative solutions that deliver superior value based off of customers' problems	<i>No significant proactive activities found</i> Ensuring customer-centric, customized product development (FO, DC)	Basing product development on actual customer problems to ensure solutions that are highly valuable	“Since this product was based on their actual problem, it will do a better job than the old [from the competitor]... Then we can sell our product to other, similar customers as well, which improves our profitability.”

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