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Jakki Mohr & John R. Nevin

# Communication Strategies in Marketing Channels: A Theoretical Perspective

Though the marketing literature acknowledges that communication plays a vital role in channel functioning, it provides no integrated theory for channel communication. The authors build a theoretical model to help understand the role of communication in marketing channels. They propose a contingency theory in which communication strategy moderates the impact of channel conditions (structure, climate, and power) on channel outcomes (coordination, satisfaction, commitment, and performance). When a communication strategy matches the channel conditions, channel outcomes will be enhanced in comparison with the outcomes when a communication strategy mismatches channel conditions.

**C**OMMUNICATION can be described as the glue that holds together a channel of distribution. The role of communication within marketing channels is an important issue from both a managerial and a theoretical perspective. Communication in marketing channels can serve as the process by which persuasive information is transmitted (Frazier and Summers 1984), participative decision making is fostered (Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz 1987), programs are coordinated (Guiltinan, Rejab, and Rodgers 1980), power is exercised (Gaski 1984), and commitment and loyalty are encouraged.

The managerial importance stems from the fact that communication difficulties are a prime cause of channel problems. Many current problems in dealer channels could be resolved by developing appropriate strategies for communication between manufacturers and resellers. For instance, a recent problem cited by computer dealers is that dealers feel they are being left

out of the decision-making process on programs that directly affect their businesses (Cooper 1988). Dealers say that by involving them in planning and by soliciting their input, manufacturers could overcome this problem (which dealers say is caused by manufacturers who issue one-way directives). Additionally, Etgar (1979, p. 65) suggests that conflict is caused by ineffective communication, which leads to "misunderstandings, incorrect strategies, and mutual feelings of frustration."

The lack of relevant theoretical and empirical research on channel communication makes it difficult to suggest effective and efficient communication strategies for channel managers. Current heuristics and rules of thumb—such as "more communication," "improved communication," and "open communication" (cf. Eliashberg and Michie 1984)—that are proffered for channel management are not only simplistic but probably inaccurate. For instance, if distrust or conflict is present between channel members, the call for open communication may be deleterious to the relationship if the open communication conveys threats or other forms of coercive power.

Though the marketing literature acknowledges that communication plays a vital role in channel functioning (Grabner and Rosenberg 1969; Stern and El-Ansary 1988), it provides no integrated theory for channel communication. Communication has been linked

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Jakki Mohr is Assistant Professor of Marketing, College of Business and Administration, University of Colorado, Boulder. John R. Nevin is Grainger Wisconsin Distinguished Professor, Graduate School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The authors gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments of James Dillard, Associate Professor of Communication Arts, and Anne Miner, Assistant Professor of Management, University of Wisconsin-Madison, as well as the helpful suggestions from anonymous *JM* reviewers.

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conceptually to both structural issues (e.g., the pattern of exchange relationships) and behavioral issues (e.g., power and climate) in the channel, yet empirical research on channel communication is sparse. The role of channel communication as a moderator between structural/behavioral conditions and channel outcomes (e.g., channel member coordination, satisfaction, commitment levels, and performance) has been largely ignored by marketing academicians.

For example, the literature has not acknowledged the moderating role of channel communication when linking the following channel conditions<sup>1</sup> to channel outcomes: tighter contractual relationships to higher performance (Reve and Stern 1986), the use of power sources to dealer satisfaction and performance (Gaski and Nevin 1985), and climate to satisfaction levels (Schul, Little, and Pride 1985). The process by which these linkages between channel conditions and channel outcomes occur is communication—the tool by which channel structure is implemented (Brown 1981), climate is expressed (Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz 1987), and power is exercised (Gaski 1984).

The major purpose of our article is to address the gap in channel theory, both in understanding channel communication and in prescribing communication strategies. By using organizational theories and research, as well as communication theories and research, we build a model for channel communication. This model can be used to draw managerial implications that go beyond the simple rules of thumb currently in use and that more accurately reflect the diversity of a channel setting. Moreover, the model specifies how communication can be used to attain enhanced levels of channel outcomes.

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the model of channel communication developed here. As shown in the figure, the model explores communication facets of frequency, direction, modality, and content; channel conditions of structure, climate, and power; and channel outcomes of coordination, satisfaction, commitment, and performance. We develop a contingency theory in which the level of channel outcomes obtained is contingent upon interaction between communication strategy and given channel conditions. To the extent that these specific combinations of communication facets match the extant channel conditions, channel outcomes will be enhanced.

The channels literature suggests that channel outcomes may consist of two steps, first a qualitative and then a quantitative step (John, Ruekert, and Churchill 1983; Robicheaux and El Ansary 1976–1977; Ruekert

and Churchill 1984).<sup>2</sup> The first step (as shown in Figure 1) consists of the impact of channel conditions on qualitative outcomes such as satisfaction, whereas the second step links the qualitative outcomes to quantitative outcomes such as performance. Thus, the impact of the interaction between channel conditions and communication strategy on outcomes also may be a two-step process.

After we more fully develop facets of communication, we discuss the relationships between the facets of communication and the various channel conditions. The implicit assumption in developing the ties between channel conditions and communication facets is that no interactions occur between channel conditions. We define combinations of the facets of communication as communication strategies, then explore the channel outcome implications of channel conditions and communication strategies. Next, we relax the initial assumption of no interactions and examine the effect of interactions on communication strategy. Finally, we discuss the managerial implications and offer suggestions for future research.

## Facets of Communication

The two bodies of knowledge that guide development of our model for channel communication are organizational theory and communications theory. These theories not only guide the selection of the facets of communication for the model, but also ground the development of the underlying theory for the model.

The facets of communication we explore come from the mechanistic perspective of communication theory (Krone, Jablin, and Putnam 1987), in which communication is viewed as a transmission process through a channel (mode). Important facets of the communication process include the message (content), the channel (mode), feedback (bidirectional communication), and communication effects. Furthermore, the message is concrete and has properties of frequency and/or duration.<sup>3</sup>

We note parenthetically that communication has

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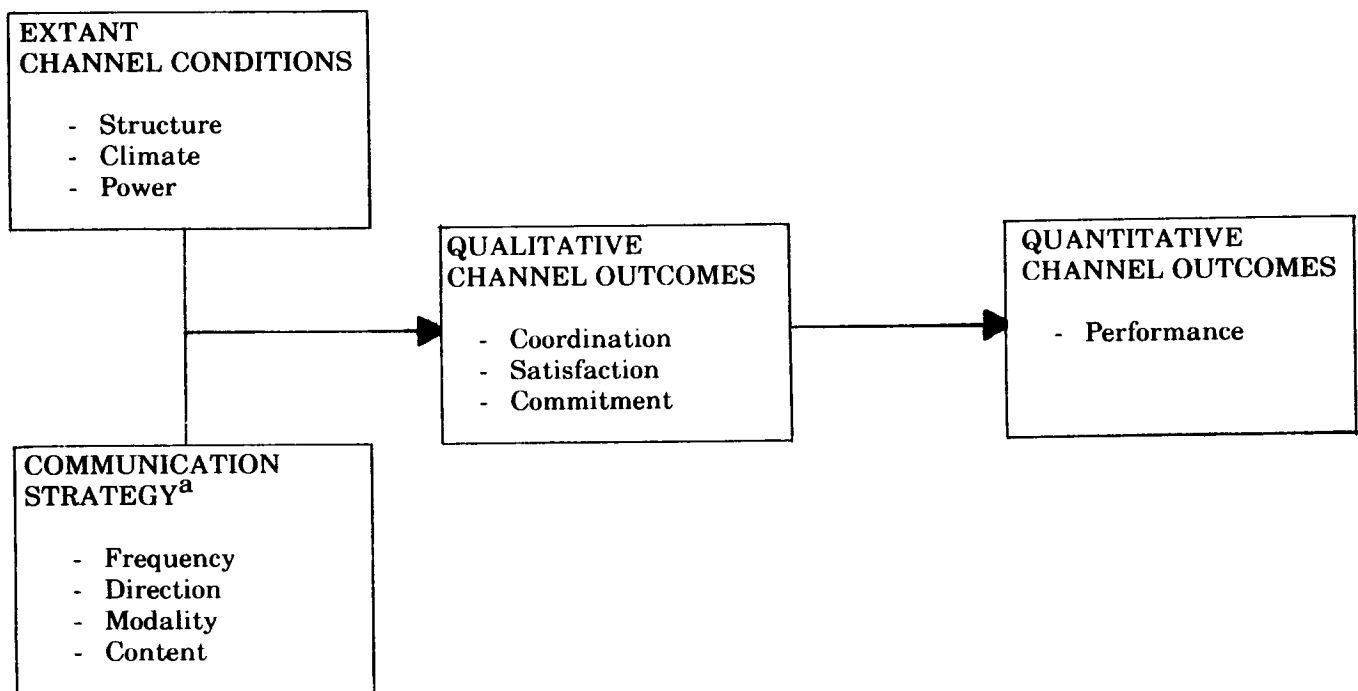
<sup>2</sup>However, other literature bases, including the sales management literature and two articles from organizational communication, indicate a different type of process. The sales management literature (Bagozzi 1980) suggests that performance affects the level of satisfaction (rather than the reverse). The articles in organizational communication suggest that the impact of communication on organizational performance variables can be assessed as a direct path (Kapp and Barnett 1983; Snyder and Morris 1984).

<sup>3</sup>In researching communication, an attempt can be made to measure facets "objectively" through observation or counting the frequency with which messages or particular types of messages are sent. Alternatively, perceptual data could be gathered from participants of communication. The perceptual approach is adopted here; because communication is a social process, perceptions of interaction typically determine behavior (e.g., Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz 1987; Roberts and O'Reilly 1974).

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<sup>1</sup>The term "channel conditions" in this article refers to both structural conditions and behavioral conditions.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Model of Communication for Marketing Channels**



<sup>a</sup>A communication strategy is the use of a combination of communication facets (frequency, direction, modality, and content). For example, one communication strategy might be frequent bidirectional communication through informal modes, with indirect content.

been studied as both a dependent (cf. Tjosvold 1985) and an independent (cf. Kapp and Barnett 1983; Snyder and Morris 1984) variable (O'Reilly, Chatman, and Anderson 1987). Many researchers avoid making direct causal statements about the effects of communication and the effects on communication (and they conduct simple correlational analyses to avoid the implicit treatment of variables as dependent or independent); however, Porter and Roberts (1976, p. 1570) state that the treatment of communication as a dependent variable is supported by the notion that "the total configuration of the organization undoubtedly exerts a strong influence on the characteristics of communication within it."

Communications theory focuses explicitly on communication and which facets are appropriately studied, but organizational theory does not. Rather, it generally addresses the nature of organizations and their role in society (Euske and Roberts 1987). Despite this lack of specific attention to communication by organizational theorists, a close examination of organizational theory uncovers implications for communication research. For example, the classical organizational theorist Max Weber suggested that the ideal authority structure or bureaucracy has, among other characteristics, formal lines of communication

in which written rules and regulations are communicated downward.

Thus, both communications theory and organizational theory suggest a focus on various facets of communication, including frequency, direction, modality, and content (Farace, Monge, and Russell 1977; Guetzkow 1965; Jablin et al. 1987; Rogers and Agarwala-Rogers 1976). Furthermore, these four facets have been studied extensively by empirical researchers in organizational communication. We explore each of these facets in more detail, briefly summarizing pertinent findings from both channels and organizational communication research.<sup>4</sup>

### **Frequency**

The amount of communication refers to the frequency and/or duration of contact between organizational

<sup>4</sup>Though the organizational communication literature describes intraorganizational communication, communication between channel members is interorganizational. Phillips (1960) suggests that sets of firms collectively constitute one large organization, which he termed an "inter-firm organization:" "firms . . . that are members of a group which has an identity apart from the individuals of which it is comprised" (p. 604). To the extent that channels of distribution constitute an interfirm organization, the organizational communication literature is transferable to a channels context, albeit with caution.

members (Farace, Monge, and Russell 1977). Though a minimal amount of contact is necessary to ensure adequate coordination, too much contact can overload organizational members and have dysfunctional consequences (Guetzkow 1965). Therefore, in assessing the frequency of communication, one should examine the amount of contact in relation to the amount of contact necessary to conduct activities adequately. Because most empirical research in organizational communication has used frequency as the indicator of the amount of communication, we use the frequency of communication rather than the duration of contact.

### **Direction**

Direction refers to the vertical and horizontal movement of communication within the organizational hierarchy (Farace, Monge, and Russell 1977). When directional flows of communication are studied in an intraorganizational context, the typical focus is on superior-subordinate interaction patterns (Dansereau and Markham 1987). Such relationships involve clear lines of authority and status. Because of the clear power of the superior over the subordinate, the literature discusses "downward" communication as flowing from the more powerful member to the weaker member.

In an interorganizational context, the focus is on patterns of contact between organizations. The organizational structure in a channel specifies roles and tasks of channel members, but authority and status may be less clear. Depending on the situation, the manufacturer (the upstream channel member) or the reseller (the downstream channel member) may be more powerful. Hence, a strict analogy to the intraorganizational setting, where communication from the powerful member flows "downward," would hold only if the manufacturer is more powerful; if the reseller is more powerful, communication from the more powerful member would be "upward."

To account for these two possibilities, our discussions involving communication direction are phrased in terms of "unidirectionality" (upward *or* downward, depending on the specific channel context) and "bidirectionality" (*both* upward and downward). Notably, however, the literature from which the discussion is drawn represents the more powerful party as being higher in the organizational hierarchy than the less powerful party.

### **Modality**

The medium of communication, or its modality, refers to the method used to transmit information. Modality has been operationalized in a variety of ways (Stohl and Redding 1987). One straightforward way has been to categorize modality as face-to-face, written, telephone, or other modes. A second way has been to categorize according to the mode's ability to trans-

mit "rich" information, or a variety of cues including feedback, facial cues, language variety, and personalization (Lengel and Daft 1985). "Each medium is not just an information source, but is also a complex information-conveying channel" (Huber and Daft 1987, p. 153). Thus, the authors cited posit a hierarchy of media richness, with face-to-face being the most rich, followed by video-phone, video-conference, telephone, electronic mail, personally addressed documents (i.e., memos and letters), and, finally, formal unaddressed documents.

Other researchers have distinguished modality in a four-way (2 by 2) classification of commercial/noncommercial and personal/impersonal modes (Moriarty and Spekman 1984).<sup>5</sup> Commercial modes are controlled by the party, such as the manufacturer, who has an advocacy interest in the message. Such modes include advertising, sales calls, and trade shows, among others. Noncommercial modes are those in which information is controlled by a third party other than those with an advocacy interest (trade journal articles, trade association reports, and consultants). The personal/impersonal distinction corresponds to one-on-one contact versus mass communication.

A final way to categorize modality has been to use a formal/informal dichotomy. Though researchers sometimes fail to define explicitly what is meant by formal versus informal modes, Stohl and Redding (1987) clarified a plethora of distinctions. A general difference is that formal modes are those somehow connected with the organization in a structured, routinized manner. Formal communication generally refers to communication that flows through written modes, though "formal" meetings (Ruekert and Walker 1987) also may be considered a formal mode. Informal modes are more personalized, such as word-of-mouth contacts, which may be spontaneous and can occur outside the organizational chart or premises.

We define modality according to the formal/informal distinction because it has been widely used in empirical and conceptual research. Formal modes are those perceived by organizational members as regularized and structured; informal modes are those perceived as more spontaneous and nonregularized.

### **Content**

Content of communication refers to the message that is transmitted—or what is said. Communication interactions can be analyzed for content by using predetermined categories (cf. Anglemar and Stern 1978) or by asking the parties in an interaction what their

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<sup>5</sup>This categorization corresponds to the direct/indirect dichotomy of Gross (1968). Direct modes correspond to commercial modes and indirect modes correspond to noncommercial modes.

perceptions of the nature of the content are (cf. Frazier and Summers 1984). Like modality, content can be categorized in a variety of ways. Two common categorizations are based on the type of information exchanged and the type of influence strategy embedded in the exchanged information. Gross (1968) examined five different types of marketing information exchanged between parties: physical inventory, promotional activities, product characteristics, pricing structures, and market conditions. He examined these five content areas in isolation from other channel issues (such as conflict, coordination, or performance). Research in channel communication that has looked beyond the content of information exchanged to the type of influence strategy embedded in the communication messages has focused primarily on the content of influence strategies (Anglemar and Stern 1978; Frazier and Sheth 1985; Frazier and Summers 1984).

Frazier and Summers (1984) distinguished between direct and indirect influence strategies. Direct communication strategies are designed to change behaviors of the target by implying or requesting the specific action that the source wants the target to take. Examples of direct communication content include requests, recommendations, promises, and appeals to legal obligations. Indirect communication is designed to change the target's beliefs and attitudes about the desirability of the intended behavior; no specific action is requested directly. An example of indirect communication content is information exchange, whereby the source uses discussions on general business issues and operating procedures to alter the target's attitude about desirable behaviors.

In their study of the usage frequency of particular influence strategies, Frazier and Summers (1984) found that the strategies of information exchange and requests (indirect and direct, respectively) were used most frequently within a channel of car dealers, followed by recommendations, promises, threats, and legalistic pleas. Information exchange and requests were intercorrelated positively and their use was correlated negatively with promises, threats, and legalistic pleas.

Frazier and Sheth (1985) added a finer distinction to the categorization and provide a conceptual, normative framework on appropriate strategies to use, depending on the prior attitude of the target toward the desired behavior. Their categorization is based on whether the consequences of accepting or rejecting the influence attempt are mediated or unmediated by the source. Strategies mediated by the source are those in which the source, contingent upon compliance or non-compliance, gives either positive or negative reinforcement (such as reward or punishment) to the target. Unmediated strategies are those in which the source does not intervene between the target's action and the outcome. Thus, consequences of compliance or non-

compliance with information exchange or requests, for example, occur without the source providing additional reinforcement. To extend the empirical work by Frazier and Summers (1984), we categorize content according to their direct/indirect scheme.

## Channel Conditions and Communication Facets

The contingent thesis we propose is that the individual communication facets, as well as aggregate communication strategies, moderate the relationship between channel conditions and outcomes. We use both the congruence and the consonance approaches to contingency analysis. Initially we follow the *congruence approach* (Mahajan and Churchill 1988), in which the relationship between two factors (i.e., between a channel condition and a facet of communication) is described. As used here, the congruence approach describes the relationship between each channel condition (channel structure, channel climate, and power symmetry) and each communication facet. The underlying, albeit implicit, assumption of the congruence approach is that when the two factors "match," outcome levels will be enhanced or made greater than when the two factors do not match. (The consonance approach to contingency analysis is discussed subsequently in the section on Channel Outcomes.)

### Channel Structure

One way to view channel structure is in terms of how exchanges between parties are patterned (Stern and El-Ansary 1988, ch. 7). Channel structures can be distinguished by the nature of the exchange relationship between parties—relational or discrete. Relational exchanges involve joint planning between parties; the relationship has a long-term orientation and interdependence is high. Discrete exchanges, in contrast, occur on an *ad hoc* basis—the relationship between parties has a short-term orientation and interdependence is low (Macneil 1981).

Truly discrete exchanges are unlikely in a channels setting, but if the distinction between relational and discrete exchange is viewed as a continuum, some channel relationships are more relational than others. We use the term "market structure" to describe channel relationships toward the discrete end of the continuum and the term "relational structure" to describe channel relationships toward the relational end of the continuum.

Following the congruence approach of contingency theory, we posit that communication in relational channel structures differs from communication in market channel structures. More specifically, communication in a relational channel structure has higher frequency and more bidirectional flows, informal

modes, and indirect content. Conversely, communication in market channel structures has lower frequency and more unidirectional flows, formal modes, and direct content. Support for these ideas is developed in the following paragraphs.

Because channel members under relational channel structures share activities that are more interdependent than those under market channel structures (Macneil 1981), a higher level of communication frequency may be necessary. Channel members interact more under these conditions because they need to share more information in order to coordinate more closely shared activities. Huber and Daft (1987) provide support for the relationship between higher frequency of communication and relational structures; (for high performing units) the greater the interdependence, the greater the frequency of communication. Presumably task interdependence causes messages to be more relevant and thus communication more frequent (Huber and Daft 1987). Moreover, for better coordination of activities, communication will flow both upward and downward in relational channel structures. Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987, p. 17) suggest that "a relationship seems unlikely to form without bilateral communication of wants, issues, inputs, and priorities."

In contrast, under market channel structures channel members act more autonomously. Though they are still interdependent in the sense that they share the task of moving products from manufacturer to the consumer, members of market channels are commonly more independent than those in relational channel structures. Because of the autonomy in decision making and their independent nature, communication frequency is lower in these market channels and is likely to be primarily unidirectional. Etgar (1976) suggests that conventional or market channel members contact each other only for specific transactions and usually drift away after the termination of each transaction. Moreover, in conventional channels, members may reject common communicative procedures as infringements on their independence.

Channel structure is related to the modality of communication in that channels with relational structures tend to rely on informal modes, whereas those with market structures tend to use more formal modes. Again, because the parties in a relational structure are more intimately linked, communication between the manufacturer and the reseller is commonly more informal. This is not to say that formal communication modes are not used. The point is that the tighter linkages between members allow for more informal interactions.

Support for more informal modes of communication under relational channel structures is found in the environmental uncertainty and transaction cost literatures. According to Huber and Daft (1987), when

uncertainty prevails, more informal communication contacts may occur. Williamson (1981) says that where uncertainty prevails and transaction costs are present, the appropriate structure is relational. Thus, as structures are more relational, communication modes may be more informal. In contrast, in market structures, parties may have no opportunity to interact on an informal basis and, as a result, communication between manufacturer and reseller may flow through more formal modes.

Relational structures also use different communication content than market structures. Parties in these longer term relationships are more willing to share benefits and burdens (Macneil 1981). Hence influence strategies are more indirect than direct. Merely providing information to other channel members may be sufficient to encourage them to participate in programs. Stohl and Redding (1987) also suggest that mutual dependence reduces the use of tough, distributive bargaining tactics.

Furthermore, communication in relational structures is likely to reflect relationship maintenance content (i.e., content aimed at furthering a supportive climate) as well as instrumental content (e.g., content aimed at consummating a transaction). Because direct communication strategies are associated more strongly with conflict (Frazier and Summers 1984), their use directly counters the goal of relationship maintenance. Therefore, indirect influence strategies are more likely to be used when channel members attempt to nurture a supportive trading atmosphere.

Market channel structures, in contrast, tend to use direct rather than indirect content (Frazier and Summers 1984). Such a strategy may be used in these channel structures because direct content takes less time and effort to implement; when the link between members is perceived to be short-term, the more expeditious strategy may be preferred.

The preceding congruence predictions about the relationship between channel structure and the facets of communication are summarized in Table 1 and stated formally in the first proposition.

- P<sub>1</sub>: Under *relational channel structures* (in comparison with market channel structures), communication has:
- higher frequency,
  - more bidirectional flows,
  - more informal modes, and
  - more indirect content.

### **Channel Climate**

Organizational climate has been defined in a variety of ways, depending on the perspective of the researcher (Falcione, Sussman, and Herden 1987 offer further reading in this area). Climate sometimes is viewed as being similar to culture. In fact, Smircich and Calas (1987) suggest that culture is simply climate reborn.

**TABLE 1**  
**Relationships Between Channel Conditions and the Facets of Communication**

Conditions	Communication Facets			
	Frequency	Direction	Content	Modality
<b>Structure</b>				
Relational	Higher	More bidirectional	More indirect	More informal
Market	Lower	More unidirectional	More direct	More formal
<b>Climate</b>				
Supportive	Higher	More bidirectional	More indirect	More informal
Unsupportive	Lower	More unidirectional	More direct	More formal
<b>Power</b>				
Symmetrical	Higher	More bidirectional	More indirect	More informal
Asymmetrical	Lower	More unidirectional	More direct	More formal

In general, climate is viewed as a representation of the organizational member's perceptions of the work environment, including such aspects as characteristics of the organization and the nature of the member's relationships with others (cf. Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1976). Climate develops characteristics directly reflecting norms, leadership, and membership composition and provides a context for interpersonal communication (Falcione, Sussman, and Herden 1987).

Climate has important implications for organizational behavior (and, by extension, channel member behavior) because of its ties to motivation and performance (Wilkins and Ouchi 1983). Climate has been explored in marketing in conjunction with salesperson motivation (Tyagi 1982), satisfaction (Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1976), attractiveness of rewards (Tyagi 1985), channel member satisfaction (Schul, Little, and Pride 1985), and resource allocation (Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz 1987). Channels researchers who adopt a political economy perspective also have viewed "transaction climate" as an important determinant of performance (Reve 1982).

The problems in defining organizational climate are exemplified by the statement that "climate is potentially inclusive of almost all organizational characteristics" (Jablin 1980, p. 329). Some of the characteristics that have been studied as part of climate are leadership style, job variety, job autonomy, organizational identification (Tyagi 1985), psychological environment, attitude toward management (Muchinsky 1977), goal compatibility, domain consensus, evaluation of accomplishment, norms of exchange (Reve 1982), mutual trust, and goal compatibility (Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz 1987). Characteristics of climate, such as autonomy and job variety, overlap with other organizational variables, such as structure. Other confounds may arise from leadership and communication. Falcione, Sussman, and Herden (1987) report that climate may overlap with other variables that may or may not be unique to the

climate domain, depending on the way climate is defined.

The four factors most commonly associated with measures of perceived organizational climate are leader initiating structure (leadership), leader consideration (trust, mutual respect), autonomy, and the reward orientation of management (i.e., how to motivate employees) (Schul, Little, and Pride 1985; Stern and El-Ansary 1988).

Despite the problem in conceptual clarity, the relationship between climate and structure appears to vary greatly (Falcione and Kaplan 1984). Wilkins and Ouchi (1983) suggest that culture is distinct from hierarchy (structure) in that culture can substitute for market or bureaucracy (relationalism) as a form of economic control. Additionally, Muchinsky (1977) argues that no singular relationship occurs between organizational communication and climate, and that this relationship remains virtually unexplored (Falcione and Kaplan 1984). Churchill, Ford, and Walker (1976) argue that climate is conceptually distinct from satisfaction, with satisfaction being an evaluative outcome. Finally, Muchinsky (1977) suggests that trust is the most consistent predictor of organizational climate.

To avoid confounds with other constructs, our definition of climate centers on the dimension of leader consideration. Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz (1987) used a similar definition in their research on climate. They took measures of trust and goal compatibility and developed a measure of climate that was psychometrically distinct from both communication and power. Climate is defined here as the feelings of channel members about the level of trust and mutual supportiveness in the interorganizational relationship (Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz 1987).

Again, our model predicts that communication will vary, depending on whether the channel climate is high or low in trust and mutual supportiveness. Specifically, communication with higher frequency and more bidirectional flows, informal modes, and indirect con-



tent is used in a channel with a high degree of trust. In contrast, communication with lower frequency and more unidirectional flows, formal modes, and direct content is used in climates lower in trust and mutual supportiveness. Support for these ideas is drawn from the culture/climate literature.

The culture literature suggests that when members experience trust and supportiveness in the organization, they develop a sense of shared identity with the organization. A feeling of shared identity can serve as a consensual paradigm that structures information acquisition and decision making for organizational members (Wilkins and Ouchi 1983). As a feeling of identification with the channel goals is established, the length of communication pieces declines (because of a shared foundation of knowledge and similarity of language usage), whereas the frequency of communication may increase (O'Reilly, Chatman, and Anderson 1987; Pfeffer 1981a).

When channel members have no feeling of shared identity or the climate is low in trust, they may not want or need a high level of communication frequency; hence the level is lower (Lengel and Daft 1985). A lower level of communication frequency may suffice to keep them informed of channel happenings but, without a shared identity, members may have no desire for more than minimal interactions. Moreover, Triandis and Albert (1987), in their work on cross-cultural perspectives, suggest that the more different two cultures are, the more difficult communication becomes. Thus, by extension, as values are more disparate, communication is less frequent.

The presence of trust in working relationships also affects the direction of communication (Blair, Roberts, and McKechnie 1985; Fulk and Mani 1986; Guetzkow 1965; Read 1962; Roberts and O'Reilly 1974), and empirical findings support more upward communication in high trust relationships. This aspect of communication is a manifestation of the relationship between the parties. Under conditions of trust and support, organizational members more willingly pass information upward (especially if communication is encouraged). Thus, the increase in upward communication adds to the information flowing downward and communication is more bidirectional where trust is present. When trust is low, channel members are more unwilling to pass information upward. Thus, in low trust climates, communication is primarily unidirectional.

Channel members commonly rely on informal modes of communication when they have a feeling of shared identity and high trust. Because of the positive, supportive atmosphere between them, channel members may seek information from one-on-one and group verbal modes (Huber and Daft 1987); by giving members the opportunity for informal conversations that

are productive and pleasurable, such interaction may further foster the supportive atmosphere.

To the extent that the climate lacks mutual support and trust, formal communication channels will be used (Phillips 1960). When members have little in common, and perhaps have little trust in each other, credible modes of information that are more noncommercial and formalized (i.e., nonadvocacy oriented, such as articles in the press) may be useful. Informal modes of contact with a distant or untrustworthy manufacturer may lead to information being discounted.

Frazier and Summers (1984) suggest that communication content utilizing indirect strategies is most effective if behavior is related to a common goal. One can use more informational influence strategies if common ground or trust is present. If trust is absent, informational influence strategies may be viewed suspiciously by the target, who may inaccurately perceive or distort the message. Therefore, under conditions of distrust, indirect influence strategies may be unsuccessful and direct strategies are employed.

These congruence predictions about the relationship between channel climate and the facets of communication are summarized in Table 1 and stated formally in the second proposition.

P<sub>2</sub>: In *mutually supportive and trusting climates* (in comparison with *unsupportive, distrustful climates*), communication has:

- a. higher frequency,
- b. more bidirectional flows,
- c. more informal modes, and
- d. more indirect content.

### **Power**

Power conditions within the channel can be either symmetrical, with power balanced between parties, or asymmetrical, with a power imbalance (Dwyer and Walker 1981). The model of channel communication developed here predicts that communication under symmetrical power will have higher frequency and more bidirectional flows, informal modes, and indirect content. Conversely, for asymmetrical power conditions, communication will have lower frequency, primarily unidirectional flows, formal modes, and direct content.

Under conditions of symmetrical power, a high frequency of communication occurs and flow is both up and down. As power is dispersed, the volume of communication increases (Bacharach and Aiken 1977; Jablin 1987). Because decentralized communication patterns are associated with the ability to cope with uncertainty, which in turn is associated with greater message generation, symmetrical power conditions are associated with higher frequency of communication (Stohl and Redding 1987). Moreover, because the two parties have equal footing in the relationship, each will

try to stay abreast of the other's actions and send messages as they try to implement their respective programs and policies.

Conversely, under conditions of unbalanced power, communication frequency is low, with primarily unidirectional flows. Authority, or the centralization of decision making, serves to economize on the transmission and handling of information, and thus communication is less frequent (Scott 1981). Dwyer and Walker (1981) provide evidence that, under conditions of unequal power, communication frequency declines slightly. Furthermore, Etgar (1976) suggests that centralized decision making, by routinizing the operations of the channel, can reduce the number of communicative messages. (These findings apply to participation in strategic decisions rather than work-related decisions.) Additionally, when contact occurs between individuals at different hierarchical levels (asymmetrical power), communication takes place more easily from the superior to the subordinate than vice versa (Guetzkow 1965; Hage, Aiken, and Marrett 1971).

When the parties are unequal in power, frequent communication may only create tensions and may cause the less powerful member to perceive the more powerful party as overbearing. The less powerful member may feel no need to send communication to the other; the more powerful member may ignore messages and merely dictate his or her own ideas. The less powerful member may even actively withhold information as a way to gain countervailing power. Blair, Roberts, and McKechnie (1985) summarize research showing that the effect of power is to restrict communication flowing from the less powerful member to the more powerful member. Additionally, less need for feedback arises when power is concentrated, because the role of the subordinate (less powerful member) is to implement decisions rather than to participate in shaping decisions (Jablin 1987).

Phillips (1960) suggests that informal modes of communication are used under conditions of asymmetrical power because the powerful member can nearly always engender compliance with his or her requests; however, we suggest that formal modes would be used under conditions of asymmetrical power. The reason for this proposition is that, if power conditions are unbalanced, modes that serve to institutionalize and legitimate the power of the more powerful member would be preferred (Pfeffer 1981b); such modes are likely to be formal in the sense that they are structured (Salancik and Pfeffer 1977). Moreover, the use of formal modes to convey messages, especially persuasive messages, may cause the less powerful member to view them as legitimate, acceptable requests.

Under symmetrical power conditions, informal modes are used. The work of Burns and Stalker (1961)

suggests that an equal distribution of power is accompanied by informal communication networks. Another reason for the use of informal modes under symmetrical power conditions is that, because the parties may be jockeying for position, communication through unplanned modes may be met with less resistance. If formal modes were used, especially for persuasive messages, the recipient may disregard the message as inappropriate.

Indirect communication content is used under symmetrical power conditions. Because neither party has more power than the other, information exchange allows both parties to make their own decisions. In contrast, when power conditions are asymmetrical, the more powerful party can use direct communication content. The more powerful member can indicate specifically what actions the less powerful party should adopt. Jablin (1987) also suggests that centralization leads to open persuasion.

These congruence predictions about the relationship between channel power and the facets of communication are summarized in Table 1 and stated formally in the third proposition.

- P<sub>3</sub>: Under *symmetrical power conditions* (in comparison with asymmetrical power conditions), communication has:
- higher frequency,
  - more bidirectional flows,
  - more informal modes, and
  - more indirect content.

## Communication Strategies

The facets of communication are combined to form communication strategies. We use the term "communication strategy" to refer to a particular combination of the facets of communication. For example, a possible communication strategy might consist of a higher frequency of communication, with more bidirectional flows, informal modes, and indirect content.

Table 1 shows that two specific combinations of communication facets emerge. The first combination includes higher frequency and more bidirectional flows, informal modes, and indirect content. This combination is likely to occur in channel conditions of relational structures, supportive climates, or symmetrical power. Use of this combination of communication elements is called "collaborative communication strategy." The second combination of communication elements includes lower frequency and more unidirectional communication, formal modes, and direct content. This combination is likely to appear with channel conditions of market structures, unsupportive climates, or asymmetrical power. Its use is labeled "autonomous communication strategy."

## Channel Outcomes

One of the critical aspects of the congruence approach (Mahajan and Churchill 1988) is that it operates on the untested assumption that when communication “fits” the channel conditions, outcomes will be enhanced. Thus, the contribution of the second approach to contingency analysis, the *consonance approach*, is that it explicitly considers how the “fit” between channel conditions and communication affects channel outcomes. In the consonance approach the assumption is that communication strategy “interacts” with a given channel condition (i.e., channel structure) to determine levels of outcome variables (i.e., channel outcomes). Phrased differently, enhanced outcome levels are contingent on the match of communication strategy to channel conditions.

The channel outcomes explored here are coordination, satisfaction, commitment, and performance. Coordination refers to the integration of the different parts of the organization to accomplish a collective set of tasks (Van de Ven, Delbecq, and Koenig 1976). Channel coordination can be viewed as the synchronization of activities and flows by channel members. Channel satisfaction refers to either the affective evaluation (Schul, Little, and Pride 1985) or cognitive evaluation (Frazier 1983) of the characteristics of the channel relationship (see also Ruekert and Churchill 1984). Commitment is a multidimensional construct reflected by the belief in and acceptance of the organization’s goals and values, a willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization, and a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization (Porter et al. 1974). Channel commitment implies a behavioral component that reflects an allegiance to a channel relationship (Ulrich 1989). Channel performance is a multidimensional outcome measure that can be assessed by considering several dimensions including effectiveness, equity, productivity (efficiency), and profitability (Bennett 1988).

Current theory suggests that different types of channel conditions are associated with different levels of outcomes. In terms of structure, centralized vertical marketing systems (i.e., relational structures) are associated with greater levels of coordination (Brown 1981) and greater efficiency (i.e., a performance measure) (Etgar 1976; Reve and Stern 1986). As to the channel condition of climate, more supportive climates are associated with higher levels of satisfaction (Schul, Little, and Pride 1985). In terms of power, symmetrical power is associated with more favorable attitudes (i.e., greater satisfaction) of the parties in the relationship (Dwyer and Walker 1981). Gaski and Nevin (1985) found that higher levels of power in general are associated with higher satisfaction and performance.

However, Figure 1 shows that communication strategy may moderate these relationships between channel conditions and outcomes. Relationships in which a channel condition is associated with enhanced outcome levels may be found only in situations in which communication strategy “matches” channel conditions.

Figure 2 illustrates the notion that channels with enhanced outcomes are ones in which the communication strategy matches or fits the extant channel conditions (shaded areas), whereas those without enhanced outcomes are ones in which the communication strategy mismatches those same channel conditions (unshaded areas). “Fit” is determined by the theoretical development of  $P_1$  through  $P_3$ , and thus is present when (1) collaborative communication strategies are used with channel conditions of relational governance structures, supportive climates, or symmetrical power and (2) autonomous communication strategies are used with channel conditions of market governance structures, unsupportive climates, or asymmetrical power.<sup>6</sup>

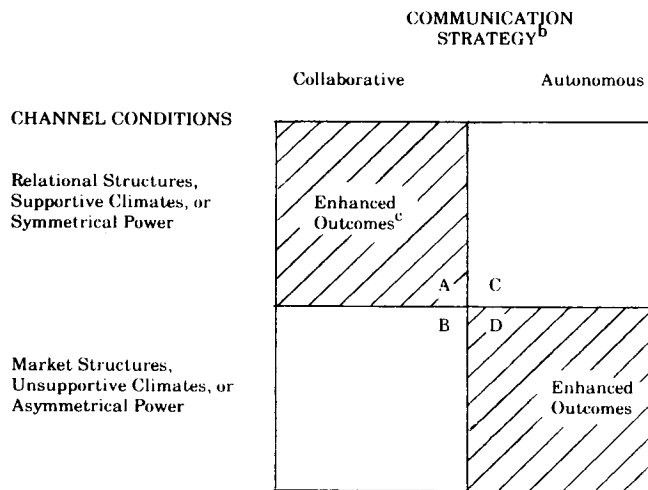
Cells A and D are the so-called “match” cells. In cell A, increased needs for communication within the channel are met by the collaborative communication strategy. Because channel members are provided the necessary and expected communication for channel conditions, as explicated in the preceding discussion of congruence propositions, members will experience enhanced or greater coordination, satisfaction, and commitment levels. As a result of these greater affective responses, more effort may be expended on behalf of the manufacturer’s product and enhanced performance outcomes will obtain.

In cell D, needs for lower frequency of communication and different types of content are met by the autonomous strategy. Justification for an autonomous strategy is given throughout the section on congruence propositions. Additional justification for autonomous strategies comes from a consideration of costs and benefits. Because collaborative communication costs more in terms of time, effort, and money, it may not be beneficial under conditions of market structures, unsupportive climates, or asymmetrical power. A manufacturer uses autonomous communication under such conditions to get the best outcomes possible at the least cost. In this cell, the autonomous strategy is the best “match” and enhanced outcomes obtain in the

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<sup>6</sup>An implicit assumption to this point is that relational structures, supportive climates, and symmetrical power are isomorphic, as are market structures, unsupportive climates, and asymmetrical power. However, it is also plausible that these three constructs do not covary isomorphically. For example, in relational structures such as successful franchise systems (e.g., McDonald’s), power asymmetry may prevail. The section Interactions Between Channel Conditions explores combinations such as relational structures and power asymmetry.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Proposed Relationships Between Communication Strategies and Channel Conditions: Implications for Outcome Levels<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup>The shaded areas represent enhanced outcome levels, or where communication strategies fit channel conditions. The unshaded areas represent nonenhanced outcome levels, or where communication strategies do not fit channel conditions.

<sup>b</sup>Autonomous communication strategy: lower frequency, more unidirectional flows, more formal modality, more direct content. Collaborative communication strategy: higher frequency, more bidirectional flows, more informal modality, more indirect content.

<sup>c</sup>Recall that the enhanced outcomes may be manifested initially in enhanced qualitative outcomes, with the impact on quantitative outcomes following.

sense that they are the best possible outcomes given the cost/benefit considerations.

Cells B and C are the so-called "mismatch" cells. In cell C, the autonomous communication strategy does not match the channel conditions. Under relational channel structures, channel members need to interact more because of the need to share information and coordinate closely shared activities. The autonomous strategy, which includes lower frequency of communication, unidirectional flows, and formal modes, is not adequate in meeting the needs of channel members in a relational structure. Because of this mismatch of communication strategy to the conditions, the coordination levels, satisfaction levels, and commitment levels are lower than in the match condition.

Lower levels of these qualitative outcomes in turn can lead to lower levels of quantitative outcomes. As channel activities are uncoordinated, members are dissatisfied, and commitment levels decline, less effort may be expended on behalf of the manufacturer's product. Efforts are uncoordinated, resulting eventually in decreased performance (i.e., sales volume and

inventory turnover) for the manufacturer's product.

Similarly, in cell B, the collaborative communication strategy mismatches the needs of the channel conditions. High frequency of communication is unnecessary under these channel conditions. Also, the use of informal modes and indirect content is a mismatch for market structures. The nonenhanced outcomes in this cell are not due to communication inadequacies (as in cell C), but to communication overload and higher expectations from channel members about the response of other members to communication messages. For instance, if channel members are burdened with information overload and are given what they perceive to be vague content (i.e., indirect messages), coordination levels will be lower, satisfaction will be stifled, and less commitment will occur.

The two-step process implies that, eventually, lower levels of qualitative outcomes will have an impact on performance outcomes. The excess energy expended by channel members on communication activities is in essence a misuse of resources.

A suggested rank-ordering of the four cells in terms of relative levels of channel outcomes is, from highest to lowest: cell A, cell D, cell B, and cell C. This suggested rank-ordering of cells A through D is based on two assumptions. First, it is based on the basic premise of contingency analysis that "fit" or "match" results in enhanced outcomes. Hence, matching cells A and D are expected to be associated with relatively higher outcome levels than mismatching cells B and C. Second, the rank-ordering is based on the assumption that the presence (match) or lack (mismatch) of an appropriate communication strategy has a stronger effect on channel outcome levels under relational channel structures, supportive climates, or symmetrical power than under market structures, unsupportive climates, or asymmetrical power. Hence, matching cell A is expected to be associated with relatively greater outcome levels than matching cell D. Likewise, mismatching cell C is expected to be associated with relatively lower outcome levels than mismatching cell B. This proposed stronger effect under relational structuring, for example, is suggested by the dramatically higher interaction expectations (fulfilled or unfulfilled) that channel members have under relational as opposed to market structures. For example, unfulfilled interaction expectations are likely to lead to relatively lower outcome levels under the higher expectations inherent in a relational channel structure.

P<sub>4</sub> through P<sub>6</sub> summarize more specifically the consonance ideas developed in this section.

P<sub>4</sub>: Communication strategy and channel structure interact to influence the level of channel outcomes.

a. When *relational structures* are present, *collabo-*

rative communication strategies are associated with enhanced outcome levels in comparison with autonomous strategies.

b. When *market structures* are present, *collaborative*, communication strategies are associated with *non-enhanced outcome levels* in comparison with autonomous strategies.

P<sub>5</sub>: Communication strategy and channel climate interact to influence the level of channel outcomes.

a. When *supportive climates* are present, *collaborative* communication strategies are associated with *enhanced outcome levels* in comparison with autonomous strategies.

b. When *unsupportive climates* are present, *collaborative* communication strategies are associated with *nonenhanced outcome levels* in comparison with autonomous strategies.

P<sub>6</sub>: Communication strategy and channel power interact to influence the level of channel outcomes.

a. When *symmetrical power* is present, *collaborative* communication strategies are associated with *enhanced outcome levels* in comparison with autonomous strategies.

b. When *asymmetrical power* exists, *collaborative* communication strategies are associated with *non-enhanced outcome levels* in comparison with autonomous strategies.

## Interactions Between Channel Conditions

All prior propositions are based on the assumption of no interactions between channel conditions. Hence, they posit "main effects." Possibly, however, the channel conditions may interact with each other. The political economy framework proposed by Stern and Reve (1980) provides some justification for examining potential interactions among channel structure, power, and sentiments (climate) within a channel setting.<sup>7</sup> As indicated by Stern and Reve (1980, p. 59):

The essence of the political economy framework . . . is that economic and sociopolitical forces are not analyzed in isolation. . . . it is imperative to examine the interactions. . . .

This possibility of interactions indicates that the channel conditions may have an interactive effect on communication strategy.

The conceptual exploration of the effects of interactions among channel conditions on communication strategies is more speculative than the preceding discussion, in which the propositions are well grounded

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<sup>7</sup>These interaction propositions are congruence propositions that describe the relationships between the two-way interactions and communication strategy. As before, in the development of these propositions we implicitly assume that outcomes will be enhanced when they are followed. The consonance predictions would address the impact on channel outcomes of the interaction between the two-way interactions and communication strategy.

in communications and organizational theory. Though the two-way interactions<sup>8</sup> between channel conditions are less solidly grounded in theory, they are a vital area of concern and warrant individual attention.

### Structure/Climate Interactions

In this two-by-two interaction, four conditions are compared: (1) relational structures and supportive climates, (2) relational structures and unsupportive climates, (3) market structures and supportive climates, and (4) market structures and unsupportive climates.

In general, parties are expected to enter into relational exchanges when a basic element of trust is present (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Frazier, Spekman, and O'Neal 1988). Because of this notion, channel structure and climate might be expected to interact to produce more exaggerated effects on communication under relational structures and supportive climates. In other words, when relational structures and supportive climates are both present, communication is more frequent, bidirectional, informal, and indirect. When trust is absent in a relational exchange, however, communication is less frequent and more unidirectional, formal, and direct.

In market structures, communication is less autonomous under supportive than under unsupportive climates. For instance, when market structures have a supportive climate, communication may have slightly higher frequency, slightly more bidirectionality, and so on, than when the market structure has an unsupportive climate. This interaction is shown in Figure 3A and expressed in the following proposition:

P<sub>7</sub>: Structure and climate have an interactive effect on communication.

a. When structures are relational, communication strategy is significantly more collaborative if climates are supportive rather than unsupportive.

b. When structures are market, communication strategy is slightly less autonomous if climates are supportive rather than unsupportive.

### Climate/Power Interactions

Several authors have argued that the effects of power depend on the context in which the power is exercised. For instance, Tjosvold (1985) examined the impact of low versus high power supervisors within cooperative, individualistic, or competitive settings. His findings indicate that the negative effects of exercising power are mitigated by a cooperative setting. Bonoma (1976) argues that ignoring the social episode, or

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<sup>8</sup>Speculation is possible on the three-way interaction of structure, climate, and power, but until the relationship between each of the three channel conditions (and the two-way interactions between them) and communication is better understood, such speculation lacks grounding.

the context of the power system (unilateral/unequal power, mixed power/bargaining situations, or bilateral power/high mutuality settings), has hindered research on power and conflict. He suggests that context of power must be considered in order to understand its effects.

Other researchers have shown that upward communication in the organization is a function not only of the influence (i.e., power) of the superior, but also of the trust the subordinate has in the superior (Athanassiades 1973; Fulk and Mani 1986; Read 1962; Roberts and O'Reilly 1974). Though the general conclusion of the authors is that "influence [of the superior] does not seem to be as strongly related to [communication] as is trust" (Roberts and O'Reilly 1974, p. 209), the effects of the difference in power between parties may not be independent of those of trust (Read 1962; Roberts and O'Reilly 1974).

Thus, in examining the interaction of power and climate, we compare four cells: (1) symmetrical power and supportive climates, (2) symmetrical power and unsupportive climates, (3) asymmetrical power and supportive climates, and (4) asymmetrical power and unsupportive climates.

From the findings of Bonoma (1976) and Tjosvold (1985), one would expect communication to be more frequent, bidirectional, informal, and indirect when power is symmetrical and climates are supportive. However, when power is symmetrical and climates are unsupportive, communication would probably not be as collaborative. A supportive climate might mitigate the effects of power asymmetry on communication. For instance, under asymmetrical power, communication may be more frequent, bidirectional, and so on if climates are supportive rather than unsupportive. This interaction is shown in Figure 3B and expressed in the following proposition.

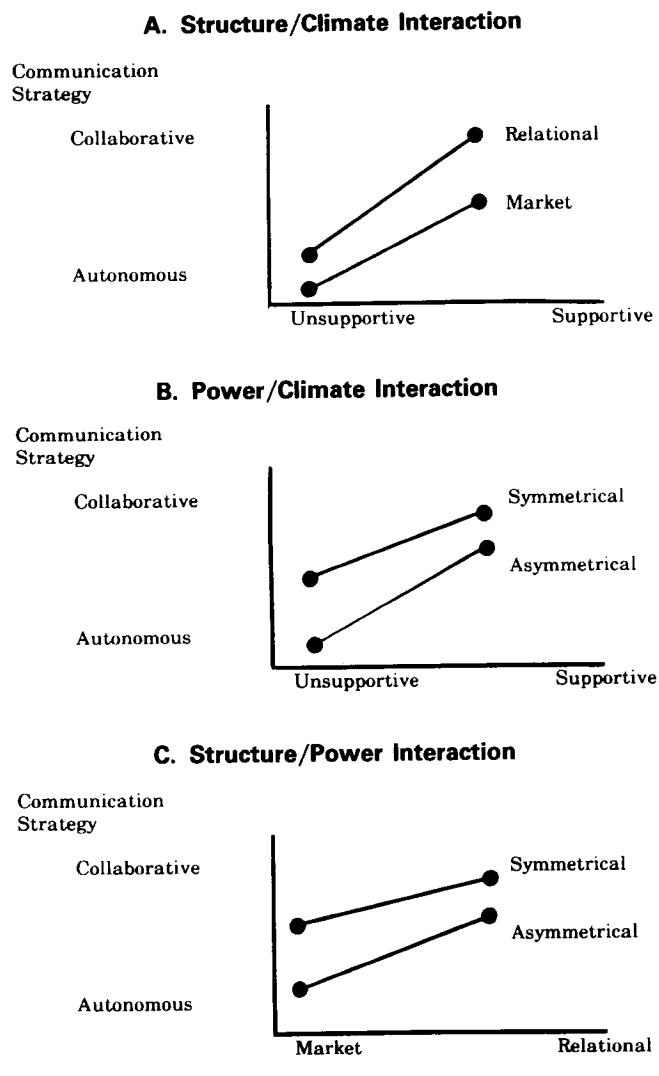
- P<sub>8</sub>: Power and climate have an interactive effect on communication.
- a. When power is symmetrical, communication is slightly more collaborative in supportive climates than in unsupportive climates.
  - b. When power is asymmetrical, communication strategy is significantly more autonomous in unsupportive climates than in supportive climates.

### Structure/Power Interactions

Stern and Reve (1980) suggest that the type of channel structure may interact with power conditions in the channel. The four cells of this interaction are (1) relational structures with symmetrical power, (2) relational structures with asymmetrical power, (3) market structures with symmetrical power, and (4) market structures with asymmetrical power.

In channels with market structures and in which power is centralized (asymmetrical), centralized (or

**FIGURE 3**  
Effect of Interactions Between Channel Conditions on Communication Strategy



formal) planning and programming may occur to overcome opportunistic tendencies and to cope with bounded rationality. This interaction suggests that if power is asymmetrical, communication strategy is significantly more autonomous under market structures than under relational structures. If power is symmetrical, however, communication strategy is relatively collaborative in both market and relational structures. This interaction is shown graphically in Figure 3C and expressed in the following proposition.

- P<sub>9</sub>: Power and structure have an interactive effect on communication.
- a. When power is symmetrical, communication strategy is slightly more collaborative in relational structures than in market structures.

- b. When power is asymmetrical, communication strategy is significantly more autonomous in market structures than in relational structures.

## Managerial Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Our integrative model of channel communication addresses the current gap in theory on channel communication. The model matches communication facets to channel conditions and develops the notion of communication strategy as a moderator between channel conditions and outcomes. Looking at combinations of communication facets under various channel conditions affords an understanding of the process by which channel outcomes occur. The link between channel conditions and channel outcomes is explicated more fully by modeling the complex role of communication.

The model of channel communication developed here can provide useful managerial insight. If we assume that empirical support for the model can be found, normative statements can be made about what communication strategy managers *should* use to obtain enhanced outcomes. Managers also can use the model to understand how communication facets are linked to channel conditions. They can use the model to understand how to improve channel outcomes. By describing the impact on outcomes of the match between communication strategies and channel conditions, the model leads to improved managerial decision making.

Work is necessary in the area of channel communication. Empirical testing of the propositions developed here would be an important first step. Testing the model might lead to normative prescriptions for

using communication to increase the level of channel outcomes.

Further theoretical work could expand the model by adding other channel conditions. For instance, the structural aspect of channel complexity (the number of levels and intermediaries at each level) and the behavioral aspects of the bases of power and conflict levels could be added to the model. One postulation might be that under conditions of high conflict, autonomous communication strategies are used. Conditions outside the channel, such as competition or regulation, may affect the type of communication. Other variables such as the type of product sold (i.e., industrial, consumer, or service) may change communication strategies.

Other communication facets, such as communication style, distortion of communication messages, and asymmetry of information possession, also could be added to the model. For instance, different communication styles may be used under various channel conditions. Also, interactions between the facets of communication could be explored in future research.

The causal link between communication and channel structure, channel behavior, and channel outcomes could be investigated. The model developed here is based on the notion that channel conditions constrain communication strategies. Communication strategies, over the long run, may influence channel conditions. By proactively using communication strategies to change channel conditions, manufacturers may be able to influence the channel conditions they face. A longitudinal analysis of communication may reveal how communication affects the evolution of channel structure and behavior.

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