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Stefan Heusinkveld
Bas Hillebrand
Jos Benders

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Email address contact author	s.heusinkveld@fm.ru.nl
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Address	Nijmegen School of Management Radboud University Nijmegen Thomas van Aquinostraat 1 P.O. Box 9108 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands Phone: +31 (0)24 361 16 15 Fax: +31 (0)24 361 19 33

Perishable Commodities?

Management Consultancies and Product Replacement[1]

Stefan Heusinkveld (corresponding author)
Nijmegen School of Management,
Radboud University Nijmegen,
P.O. Box 9108, NL-6500 HK Nijmegen,
The Netherlands.
Phone +31 24 3611615, Fax +31 24 3611933,
E-mail s.heusinkveld@fm.ru.nl

Bas Hillebrand
Nijmegen School of Management,
Radboud University Nijmegen,
P.O. Box 9108, NL-6500 HK Nijmegen,
The Netherlands.
Phone +31 24 3611407, Fax +31 24 3611933,
E-mail b.hillebrand@fm.ru.nl

Jos Benders
Nijmegen School of Management,
Radboud University Nijmegen,
P.O. Box 9108, NL-6500 HK Nijmegen,
The Netherlands.
Phone +31 24 3615578, Fax +31 24 3611933,
E-mail j.benders@fm.ru.nl

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the process of product replacement within management consultancies. Drawing on product marketing literature we argue that main knowledge suppliers do not simply regard their knowledge commodities as inherently perishable during an alleged downturn phase on the knowledge market. Rather, our study reveals that management consultants may follow a variety of alternative strategies to extend the life of their knowledge products. This provides support for the notion that there is more continuity within the supply system than management fashion theorists would suggest and identifies some key elements that play a role in shaping this process. Our discussion aims to provide some clues for further studying the evolution of management knowledge within the system of knowledge supply.

KEY WORDS

knowledge commodification, management consultants, management fashion, product life cycle, product replacement

INTRODUCTION

Management consultants are generally presented as important actors in the market for management knowledge. Theorists emphasize the key role of consultancies in the production and dissemination of new knowledge commodities (Fincham, 1995; Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Kipping, 1997; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Knowledge products are also important to consultants as they are regarded an important means for to enhance their business and contributes to building an innovative reputation. Therefore, consultants have to continuously adapt their product portfolio to keep their services in tune with market demand (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2002). However, in spite of the increasing attention for management consultants as key knowledge suppliers, there has still been little attention for the way knowledge products evolve within consultancies, and particularly during a general downturn phase.

Management fashion literature suggest that, like any product, new knowledge commodities move through a life-cycle. This entails that a short period of popularity is quickly followed by a decline in attention resulting in a widespread rejection on the knowledge market (Gill and Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). As the popularity of these knowledge commodities inevitably shows a short-lived character, maintaining a commodity that is suffering from a collapse in interest is likely to be detrimental to consultancies (Kipping, 1997). The apparent transient nature (Gill and Whittle, 1993; Abrahamson, 1996) and shortening life-spans (Carson et al., 1999) of these cycles suggest there hardly is any opportunity for knowledge accumulation within knowledge suppliers (Lammers, 1988).

In contrast to this view, theorists of product marketing consider a new product not as predestined to mature and die, but see its evolution as largely open-ended (Day, 1981; Tellis and Crawford, 1981). In addition it is emphasized that suppliers do not necessarily eliminate a worn-out product but may pursue a large variety of different strategies that significantly extend its life (Saunders and Jobber, 1994). This raises the question whether management ideas are indeed as perishable to knowledge suppliers as been suggested by the turnover of management ideas (see also Lammers, 1988; Clark, 2004).

The above section reflects the need for in-depth insight into the way knowledge commodities evolve over time. Theorist stressed the need to move empirical research into management fashion beyond the study of print media (Benders, Heusinkveld and Nijholt, 2004; Clark, 2004). Therefore this paper aims at exploring how knowledge suppliers view the evolution of their products during an alleged downturn phase. We draw on product marketing literature because this provides important insight into the way suppliers deal with a product in relation to its life-cycle, an issue that has received scant attention in current literature on management fashion and management consultancies. Unlike current literature, this paper shows that it is at least questionable whether knowledge suppliers consider the development of a commodity as inevitably transient as many bell-shaped media curves suggest. Rather, our study illustrates that consultants do not simply reject a commodity during its alleged downturn phase in favor of a new idea, but employ various alternative strategies to increase the longevity of their products. This stresses the importance of taking into account elements that determine how management knowledge is shaped and evolves within knowledge producers in discussions about management fashion and consultancies (Clark, 2004).

TRANSIENCE AND PERSISTENCE IN KNOWLEDGE COMMODITIES

Knowledge commodification is regarded as a process of packaging management ideas into a form that can be sold on the market for management knowledge (Fincham, 1995; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Various key elements such as simplicity, promises of performance improvement and universal applicability (Fincham, 1995; Kieser, 1997; ten Bos, 2000; Røvik, 2002) enhance a commodity's appeal to management knowledge consumers thereby increasing their value on the market. Benders and van Veen (2001) stress that a crucial characteristic of commodities to become widely accepted in the market is their interpretative space. The room for interpretation enables a commodity to become perceived as applicable in a large variety of different situations and allows 'translating' (Czarniawska and Sévon, 1996) them in different ways. In the next sections we discuss current views as to how these knowledge commodities develop in time and the role of knowledge suppliers in relation to this.

Lifecycles

Like many other products, knowledge commodities tend to follow a life-cycle pattern on the market for management solution (Huczynski, 1993, p. 233) resulting in recurring short-lived periods in the attention for specific management knowledge. Analyzing the evolution of three consultancy-driven knowledge products, Gill and Whittle conclude that many knowledge commodities move through some predestined phases of (1) birth, (2) rapid growth; (3) maturity, and result in an inevitable (4) decline in which the commodity is collectively rejected (1993, p. 289). This lifecycle starts when some 'founding fathers' conceptualize a collection of coherent ideas and launch it under an attractive label. After the commodity's introduction it may increasingly generate interest in the knowledge market. When popularity grows, a growing number of other producers tend to follow and market the new idea to be in line with what is considered as innovative and rational. However, new commodities tend to be evaluated less favorably after their large scale implementation (Brunsson and Olsen, 1997), a given that plays an important part in the fading of attractiveness. Typically, the simplicity and major promises associated with new ideas cannot be completely realized and their implementation generates new unanticipated problems. This means that after a period of high enthusiasm a commodity becomes criticized, thereby loosing its aura of a rational and progressive idea after which it is quickly substituted by a new appealing vision.

As Clark (2004) notes, the empirical support for the life-cycle thesis in the attention for knowledge commodities as conceptualized by Gill and Whittle (1993) is restricted to studies analyzing the evolution of a commodity's traces in the print media (e.g. Pascale, 1990; Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Carson et al., 1999; Benders and van Bijsterveld, 2000; Jones and Thwaites, 2000; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001; Scarbrough and Swan, 2001; Miller et al., 2004). Although there may be notable differences between the evolution patterns of different commodities (Carson et al., 1999) and within different professional subgroups (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001) these studies support the belief that after a period of dormancy, some ideas are able to have a significant impact on the managerial discourse (Furusten, 1999) which is quickly followed by a sharp decline in attention. Abrahamson and Fairchild's analysis reveals that in its upswing, the content of a commodity's discourse is characterized by enthusiasm and high expectations while its downswing shows increasingly negative evaluations and a more critical attitude (1999, p. 735). In addition, they argue that the bell-shaped swings in managerial discourse co-evolve with a commodity's diffusion among business firms (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999, p. 731). In other words, it is suggested that the downswing in discourse on a commodity is paralleled by firms' collective rejection. Not being able to meet its initial expectations creates a less favorable picture and easily causes a concept to become controversial on the knowledge market. Obviously, this provides space for new, uncontaminated commodities to emerge. Studies of print media traces even indicate that the pace of these management fashion lifecycles is increasing (Kieser, 1997; Carson et al. 1999).

Knowledge supply

Huczynski argued that the management knowledge industry follows a logic of 'planned obsolescence' (1993, p. 285) which results in a continuous abandonment of commodities in favor of new ideas in the hope of rapidly making business out of the managerial issues of the day. As Abrahamson (1996, p. 257) stresses, for creating an image of progress in management thinking it is essential that the commodities that are currently in vogue do not remain on the market for too long. New and promising ideas are inherently more appealing for knowledge consumers than the complexity and inconsistencies related to the realization of 'old' ideas (Brunsson and Olsen, 1997). Therefore, the commodification of management knowledge increases a persistent need for new commodities (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Clark and Greatbatch (2004, p. 415) even stress that every few years, knowledge suppliers require a new commodity to maintain demand for their services thereby strongly dissociating themselves from earlier ideas. Introducing something new makes the existing regarded as old and thereby less attractive (Ortmann, 1995). For instance, two well-known management gurus write that:

> 'But none of the management fads of the last twenty years - not management by objectives, diversification, theory Z, zero-based budgeting, value chain analysis, decentralization, quality circles, 'excellence', restructuring, portfolio management, management by walking around, matrix management, intrapreneuring, or one-minute managing - has reserved the deterioration of America's corporate competitive performance. They have only distracted managers from the real task at hand.' (Hammer and Champy 1993, p. 25)

The bell-shaped swings in commodities' popularity unavoidably hold important implications for consultants as key knowledge suppliers. For instance, McKinsey's reputation on the Multidivisional model in the 1960s led to serious problems for this consulting firm when many large business organizations no longer considered this model useful. The attention for this commodity witnessed a significant decline and demand for 'Multidivisionalization' dropped off by the early 1970s. As a result, at the McKinsey offices: 'somewhere about the 1970 the phone stopped ringing' (McKenna, 1997, p. 230). Huczynski (1993, p. 285) states that knowledge commodity suppliers can be rather confident that any fashionable idea will become regarded outmoded and displaced in the near future. As a result, the usefulness of commodities to consultancies is only short-lived (Kipping, 1997, p. 192). Staute (1996) even suggest that 'Consultants are continuously engaged in rejecting what their colleagues recommended only a few years ago' (1996, p. 144). Hence, a lack of market attention likely induces management consultancies to collectively abandon a commodity that has been widely embraced only a short time before.

Being strongly associated with recurrent transient cycles easily leads one to see consultancies as prominent merchants of perishable commodities. In their concluding section, Gill and Whittle even talk about: '…the cyclical and non-cumulative nature of much of what passes for consulting approaches to organizational change' (1993, p. 292). These recurrent cycles suggest that the supply of management solutions is subject to notable changes. The transient patterns hypothesized by management fashion accounts make it at least doubtful that consultancies develop any bases that increase the likelihood of knowledge entrenchment (Zeitz et al., 1999). Rather, the inherent perishability of management ideas suggests a persistent lack of accumulation within the system of knowledge supply (Lammers, 1988).

SUPPLIERS AND PRODUCT DOWNTURN

This section discusses current explanations for a knowledge commodity's evolution by first drawing on long-standing debates on the product life-cycle (PLC) concept in the product marketing literature. In this, the PLC has been considered as a too much aggregated and deterministic description of a product's evolution in the market place. While these limitations of the PLC conceptualization have been recognized in the field of marketing research a long time ago, we believe this has been to a large extent ignored in discussions of life-cycles in knowledge commodities. Secondly, to further understand the view of the supply side of management knowledge in relation to this lifecycle, we use literature of product replacement. These accounts reveal that producers may deploy a variety of different strategies to extend the lifespan of their products and underlying technologies in case of a product's alleged downturn. To the best of our knowledge, this has not received any systematic attention in literature on management fashions and management consultants.

Product lifecycles

The PLC has been central to long-standing debates in the marketing literature (Midgley, 1981; Kotler, 1988). In this literature it is argued that, the PLC is seen as a valuable planning instrument to marketing managers as it provides insight into the evolution of a product as well as the characteristics that are typical for each stage. PLC advocates suggest that each phase of the curve requires a constellation of specific marketing activities. For instance, Kotler (1988) includes an overview of the typical marketing objectives and activities for each phase of the PLC. This should enable managers to predict market developments and help them to recognize a product's position in the cycle (Day, 1981). It is therefore that the PLC is regarded as an important basis for strategic decisions of organizations in relation to a specific product.

The intuitive appeal and proliferation of the PLC concept among management intellectuals and practitioners did not safeguard this model against heavy criticism. Marketing academics emphasized that the PLC may lead to serious problems if not used properly. Dhalla and Yuspeh (1976) even urged managers to 'forget the product life cycle concept'. The main problem they have with the PLC is that it has hardly any predictive value. Specifically, this model is considered as a too deterministic and aggregated description of a product's evolution in the market place. Theorists have pointed out that the life history of a product does not rigidly follow some predetermined stages, but is the result of many underlying forces that are subject to change (Day, 1981; Tellis and Crawford, 1981). As a result, a bell-shaped product curve is more often an exception than the rule. Many products show quite different curves, with some taking off much slower or faster, some staying on top for almost indefinitely while other go down immediately, and some with showing all kinds of revivals. Particularly the last phase of the PLC causes much concern. The traditional PLC curve suggests that products are subject to inevitable downturn after some time. Employing the concept in praxis may easily lead to a self-fulfilling prophesy as managers who strongly believe in the PLC as a planning instrument may see the decline of the sales of their product as a sign of their product being in the last phase of its life, suggesting them to stop investing in the product with the logical consequence that the product indeed slowly meets its collective abandonment.

Yet, as Dhalla and Yuspeh state: 'the PLC is a *dependent* variable which is determined by marketing actions; it is not an *independent* variable to which companies should adapt their marketing program' (1976, p. 105, italics in original). Hence, a product is not predestined to merely mature and die. Rather, a product evolution should be seen as dynamic and open-ended, thereby stressing the need to understand the key forces related to consumers and producers that define the shape of this interactive process (Day, 1981; Sproles, 1981; Tellis and Crawford, 1981). In other words, products are not necessarily doomed to fade but can be revived when the appropriate measures are taken by organizations (Levitt, 1965; Saunders and Jobber, 1994; Avlonitis et al., 2000). We elaborate on this in the next section.

Product replacement

In the above it is indicated that in the product marketing literature the PLC is seen as open-ended thereby not necessarily implying an inevitable rejection of the 'old'. In relation to this, thereby drawing on the work of Ansoff (1965), marketing theorists conceptualized different types of product replacement strategies, each with their specific implications for the longevity of a product's elements. These strategies differ from each other on two key dimensions: (1) the degree to which the marketing of the product is modified and (2) the degree to which the product's content is modified (Saunders and Jobber, 1994).

The most undemanding version of revitalizing a product is to change little or nothing to its content or the way it is marketed. Many products in decline simply have lacked the support to maintain their 'old' top-position. As a consequence, it slowly shifted to the back of the customers' attention resulting in gradually dropping sales. Yet, by re-launching a product and thereby creating new awareness for it among its target consumers, sales may be increased again. Products that are practically dead may be revitalized by just reinvigorating the 'old' advertising or promotion formats of the 'old' product (Wansink and Huffman, 2001). For instance, products such as the yo-yo continuously reappear on the market after a significant drop in sales only a short time before indicating that suppliers are repeatedly able to give its popularity a new impetus among a specific group of consumers in a similar fashion.

One may also re-position the product while leaving its content unchanged. Products may have become old fashioned in the eyes of the consumer, or the brand name may have obtained a negative connotation, but this does not necessarily mean that the product's content is destined to the graveyard. For instance, the product may be re-labeled (i.e., given another brand name), its popularity may be stimulated by pointing at other unique selling points, or may be stimulated by encouraging new uses of the same product (Dhalla and Yuspeh, 1976, Wansink and Huffman, 2001). Re-positioning can also take shape by changing a product' target market (Saunders and Jobber, 1994, p. 438) thereby aiming the same product to a different group of customers. All these measures concentrate on generating marketing efforts that allow supplying the same 'old' product to an unchanged or different segment of target customers.

A modification of the product itself may also lead to the recovery of a product's attractiveness. Technologies evolve and customer demands change, making products out-of-dated. Yet, a redesign of the product's content may solve this problem (Berry and Lampo, 2000). Obviously, the degree to which the product is redesigned may differ from slight changes to almost (or even entirely) new products replacing the old product. Sometimes, the product change is inconspicuous, i.e., the marketing is not changed and the market is not told about the changes made to the product. For example, many software products are upgraded without the customer noticing. And even when the customer is told, it is mostly just seen as a reason to draw attention to the product without sending a new message, i.e., position it in a new way. Consider for example a new washing powder that carries the label 'new' although it has been on the market for years in basically the same format.

Yet, modified products may also be accompanied with changes in the way it is marketed. In many such cases the product will be perceived by the market as a new product, replacing an existing product. This raises the question up to what point we are talking about one and the same product (and thus PLC). As Day (1981, p. 61) puts it: 'when is a change sufficiently distinct to justify a separate life cycle analysis?' Should the analysis be on the level of product classes (e.g., razors), product types (safety razors), brands (Gillette razors) or even versions (Gillette Mach 3 turbo)? While the answer to this question will always remain open to debate, the overall opinion is that we should consider it to be a new product (and thus a new PLC) when it provides a sharp departure from the underlying technology, the needs it tries to fulfill, or the customer group it is aimed at (Day, 1981). Yet, from the organizations' point of view it may still be the same product using (more or less) the same underlying technology, serving the same customer needs of the same customers.

We may conclude that it is generally agreed upon in the product marketing literature that PLCs do not necessarily take a bell-shaped curve with a predetermined end. Instead, marketing literature has shown that corrective actions may be taken to extend the life of a product by (1) changing the way of presenting it in the market or by (2) modifying the product itself.

METHOD

In trying to understand how knowledge suppliers deal with an alleged downturn, we explore the possibilities that the evolution of knowledge commodities is regarded as open-ended and thereby allowing for various alternative strategies. To do so, we contacted a large number of consultants who authored BPR publications during the 1990s, a knowledge commodity that allegedly followed a bell-shaped popularity curve (Kieser, 1997; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Carson et al., 1999; Jones and Thwaites, 2000; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001) and became part of an arsenal of consulting techniques (Fincham and Evans, 1999). Contacting these BPR consultants at a moment 'after the hype' allowed us to gain access to the consultants view about the way they have experienced an alleged downturn. Where possible we invited colleagues from the same firm for verifying purposes and creating a richer view of the replacement process. This resulted in a sample of 29 consultants from 14 different consultancies (see appendix). This allowed us to analyze the way that the replacement process is perceived in a variety of different settings.

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews in which respondents were asked to describe their perception of the way BPR evolved within their consultancy in relation to its alleged lifecycle in the media and the knowledge market. The interviews covered the way their consulting firm encountered this management idea as well as how it developed over time within the firm. Particular attention was given to the perceived traces of BPR in the consultancy. The consultants were interviewed between August 2000 and March 2002 at their offices and the interviews on average lasted about 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded on minidisk, transcribed and sent back to each of these informants which allowed them to verify and correct it.

The analysis concentrated on the way consultants perceive a knowledge product's downturn and what strategies they employ to deal with it. By continuous comparison of interview data and relevant theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we aim to illustrate some key strategies shaping the evolution of management knowledge within knowledge suppliers. Our data analysis started with coding and comparing sections associated with a perceived downturn of a commodity in the market. Integration of themes emerging from the data resulted in a variety of changes to the initial product as perceived by consultants. Consistent with theory of product replacement, we categorized these perceived changes into simple data displays (Miles and Huberman, 1994), thereby distinguishing (1) modifications in the way a commodity is marketed and (2) modification the knowledge product's content. Comparison of data and relevant theory with respect to replacement revealed typical clusters of changes. We further developed this into a conceptual framework which was verified by using coded data. This also allowed to further specify the conceptual categories. Based on our framework and coded interview data we described and illustrated conceptually distinct strategies and their specific properties as perceived by consultants in dealing with a commodity downturn.

REPLACEMENT IN KNOWLEDGE COMMODITIES

In the following sections we build on literature of management fashion and management consultants by indicating that prominent knowledge suppliers do not simply reject their products during an alleged downturn phase, but a commodity's evolution is regarded as largely open-ended. Drawing on interview data, we try to understand how consultancies may deploy alternative strategies constituted by (1) changes in marketing efforts and (2) changes to the commodity, that extend the usage of their knowledge products (see Figure 1). It is therefore that knowledge suppliers can consider elements of a worn-out commodity useful even after a general downturn phase.

Figure 1 - please refer to page 27

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Commodity re-launch

In answer to a general downturn in market attention, consultants may follow a strategy that produces little or no changes to the knowledge product and related marketing. At the same time, consultants perceive different elements that reduce its re-use while at the same time increase the possibilities for highly situational and moderate re-launch of the same product.

Although consultants have no a priori negative attitude towards the underlying management ideas of a commodity in its downturn phase, they are particularly critical about re-exploiting an outdated knowledge commodity in the same, relatively universal and ill-defined fashion. When a commodity resonates on the market for a while, it is perceived to be 'wearing out' (Benders and van Veen, 2001) which decreases the opportunities for re-use in a similar way. As one consultant stated: 'And don't even start about BPR, that's yesterday's product.' [consultant# xvii] Using worn-out products in the market reduces the possibility for consultants of being regarded as innovative knowledge suppliers. This means that simply reinvigorating the old services is not expected to increase the ability to generate assignments and heavily drawing on them even becomes regarded harmful to a consultant's market reputation. As a result, 'old' management ideas can no longer be used in interaction with clients in a similar way as in the early phases of its life-cycle without further ado. Therefore consultants see little possibilities for immediate and unmodified re-launch of a commodity.

In addition to market related factors, also different personal motives may lead to a lack of interest to commodities amongst a population of consultants, not the least because of the inherent appeal of newer ideas. For instance one respondent noted: 'Personally, it is incredibly exciting to continuously think up new things and work on new things.' [consultant# x] The professional interest is provided with new impulses by introducing new ideas. 'At [consultancy] I was the partner for E-business and that was exiting and incredibly fun despite the fact that you know it's a hype which is untenable in the long run.' [consultant# xxiii] At the same time, consultants may not like constantly reiterating similar projects. In other words, the possibility of doing something new keeps consultants interested: 'So if certain consultants have done something three times they want to do something different ...' [consultant# iv]

A commodity's downturn does not automatically implies that the entire 'package' (Røvik, 1996) associated with an 'old' knowledge product is readily abandoned or will no longer be used in marketing their services to clients. Rather, a knowledge product can be inconspicuously retained which increases the possibilities for a highly context dependent and moderate re-launch as it remain more easily recognized as useful by both consultants and their clients. ‘I don’t consider BPR a hype. Maybe the worn-out, specific interpretation of the term BPR, that is, realizing massive personnel reductions, that has been perhaps a hype. But the approach still exists and we use it at our clients every day.’ [consultant# vii] The interview data reveal that consultants may still reinvigorate an ‘old’ commodity in their interactions with clients but tend to do this in a highly selective and moderate way. Consultants seek to take advantage of the fact that many people relate the label to similar ideas. As a result, they do not have to explain a lot when using it again in client interactions. One consultant observed this in his own practice:

‘If you think it’s useful than you will use the term BPR another time, but it has become a term people have a specific image of and thus know what will going to happen to them. Of course it is very convenient when as a consultant you do not have to explain in detail that you will put the organization upside down […]. If you think you need a BPR trajectory, then you can simply say it and people will know what you mean. So it still remains a point of reference to indicate what kind of change process you mean.’ [consultant# vi]

Consultants also perceive that a commodity’s content increasingly may become entrenched in their daily practices and regarded as common business to clients. They therefore do not require major changes in the way their services are performed and marketed to become part of new assignments: ‘During the hype we sold it separately, but now we sell it just because process analysis and re-design is useful for your client organization.’ [consultant# xii] After a period of exaggerated attention consultants recognize that a once fashionable commodity no longer need to be emphasized quite so strongly in the market as the underlying ideas of the services have become generally accepted and considered as valuable services. One consultant noticed that after the hype: ‘You can do it now much faster because it has become more accepted. BPR has taken a permanent position in the toolkit of consultants. Among managers it is now accepted that processes can be and should be redesigned.’ [consultant# xx] This may imply that both consultants and their clients generally have become more receptive to the underlying ideas (Røvik, 1996; Cohen and Levinthal, 1990), a given that will likely provide opportunities for situational and moderate re-launch. As one informant stated:

‘The effect of BPR at [consultancy] was that thinking in terms of processes, an issue that we had already done in a number of fields, suddenly became recognizable and important to our clients. Thanks to a concept like BPR, a larger group of consultants have recognized that thinking in terms of processes can help to get a grip on certain problems. […] Those ideas around BPR will remain a source of inspiration to help organizations.’ [consultant# xxiv]

Commodity re-positioning

In this section we illustrate that consultancy firms may seek to increase the longevity of their approaches by realizing adaptations in the product's marketing while leaving the commodity's content largely unchanged. More specifically, this part indicates that a re-positioning of a knowledge product may take shape in (1) marketing it in a different vocabulary or (2) refocusing of marketing efforts to different target customers.

First, the data indicate that consultants do not readily have qualms about using new terms for 'old' ideas and therefore tend to easily dispose of a commodity's label in their marketing efforts if it turns out to be of little use in generating assignments at potential client organizations. This may result in changes at a nominal level i.e. the re-labeling of services, departments or even the company: 'In the early 1990s everyone read in the newspapers how important BPR was. The next wave was E-business. Here we abandoned the term BPR because it was out of fashion.' [consultant# xxiii] Using new, and uncontaminated terms while deploying a similar 'old' repertoire allows consultants to re-position their product thereby dissociating themselves from the worn-out commodity that was embraced only a short time before. Consider for instance the following statement which indicates how a consultancy sought to re-position their knowledge commodity:

> 'So at that moment the question was whether we still should invest in BPR. I suggested to answer that question with yes. […] There was increasing criticism on BPR and all those stories about failures started. In addition, BPR in that form simply generated less income. To go out and market BPR as consultancy did not seem very clever. We therefore chose for the concept BPI, Business Process Improvement in which the goal was more emphasized.' [consultant# xx]

Changes in the use of language may have little effect on the related consulting praxis, or as one respondent said: 'The term BPR is not used so often any more, but regarding the work we do on the subject of process improvement, process design and the design of new ventures it is exactly the same as five years ago.' [consultant# vii] This means that the ideas and practices formerly associated with a knowledge commodity are still considered useful, only at a certain point in time those elements are renamed. While consultants may put their service offerings in different terms, the interpretative space (Benders and van Veen, 2001) allows these consultants to offer similar service components and draw on established knowledge and experiences. 'So at clients BPR may have a negative connotation. In such a case a consultant you just name it differently, but do the same thing.' [consultant# xix] Changing the marketing approach by using different language allows consultancies to maintain a similar underlying repertoire. On the demand side, the market allows for the opportunity to re-position knowledge products thereby reiterating 'old' knowledge.

'The demand for large-scale changes has remained fairly stable despite the fact that the hype went down in terms of publications. […] That's why we have invested so much in the expert techniques because we wanted to continue doing these kind of projects and had to build up success cases even though that the term BPR had perished. In that case terms such as innovation, reorganization, drastic performance improvements are used' [consultant# xiii]

Secondly, consultants may see important new opportunities for a worn-out commodity to succeed in different client groups. Therefore, a consultancy may extend the longevity of a knowledge product by introducing it into new markets. This involves refocusing the marketing approach to a different group of potential clients while continuing to deploy the current repertoire but now in a specific niche within which a concept has no particular connotation yet and is therefore still uncontroversial. As a consultant mentioned, such a context may be found in a different market segment:

'Traditional BPR is something we can still do very well, so we will use it in emerging markets for this approach such as Healthcare and Education.' [consultant# xxvi]

Thus consultancies may seek to shift the promotional activities of a commodity to other branches in which it is still regarded as new and unrealized. At the same time, this requires adaptations of marketing efforts to further promote a commodity and make it interesting for a new group of potential client organizations. For instance, respondent # xviii sought to stimulate BPR adoption in the local government by writing a book about it discussing some exploratory research about whether BPR would 'work' in this branch. In addition, consultancies may benefit from experiences obtained in previous markets and use this as selling argument in new markets:

'Commercially we found it clever to initially maintain calling the concept BPR. In other branches we were already beyond the hype. […] We made clear in the Healthcare that [consultancy] knows a lot about BPR through our experiences in other sectors. [consultant# xxvii]

While providing new opportunities to sell their services, the introduction and marketing of an 'old' commodity into a new market is regarded not unproblematic as it requires drawing on specific market related knowledge. Quickly exploiting new market segments involves the generation and deployment of market-related expertise and a specific network of client relations. As one consultant put it: 'Our consultancy group Finance & Cost Management has more contacts in the Banking and Insurance world than we have, but they know that the competence for BPR is located here so we will seek to generate combined projects.' [consultant# iii] When consultancies seek to readily adapt its marketing efforts for a commodity to a different market segment, they may run into a problem that: '… they were not able to exploit this market because they did not have the right networks and did not speak its language.' [consultant# xxvii]

Repertoire refinement

In contrast to the above strategy, consultants also consider realizing inconspicuous changes to the knowledge commodity to increase the longevity of their services. This entails creating genuine modifications to the product's repertoire supporting its commercialization and implementation (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2002) while at the same time making little changes in the marketing efforts. The increased proliferation of a commodity's ideas over time urges consultants to refine their repertoire in order to differentiate it from others. One consultant explained that: 'In early instances we came to the client with a number of vague pictures and together with that client we learned a lot. […] but to the extent it becomes more common, and also been picked up by other firms you have to be better documented and have build up a better experience database.' [consultant# xix] Consultants perceive the experiences, generated during assignments as important in modifying the knowledge product. This may take shape in a gradual refinement of the underlying repertoire that manifest in adaptations of (1) a consultancy's formal knowledge systems and (2) cognitive representations of individual consultants.

Based on experiences generated by consultants in their assignments over time, the knowledge product's content may change thereby modifying the initial commodity in a subtle way. Consultants emphasized that the assignments are considered as a crucial source of new experiences that will likely feed inconspicuous adaptations to the consulting services:

'Those adaptations were particularly the result of our experiences at [consultancy] within which we were faced with the fact that some BPR trajectories simply lasted too long.' [consultant# xxvii]

As a result, consultants experience that the repertoire underlying a commodity is advanced over time while these are not necessarily accompanied by major changes in the way it is marketed. This would mean that accumulating knowledge on a specific subject can be drawn upon in new assignments and modify the shape of their service in a variety of different ways. One important development to the knowledge product tends to lay in enhancing its underlying techniques. Such as one consultant indicated: 'the initial concept remained standing, but has been much more detailed into methods, techniques and tools.' [consultant# xix] Also consultants experience a gradual inclusion of new elements to the initial product repertoire. In this way the commodity can address a larger spectrum of client problems. This entails an enlargement of the arsenal of services that can be carried out in relation to a commodity while marketing the same product:

'That broadening [of BPR] had also to do with the fact that more consultancy disciplines became involved in these kind of large projects. So people from Human Resource Management and Finance were included. Initially this was very badly coordinated and that's why we tried to better align it. In this way the concept developed by providing a place for these aspects.' [consultant# xxi]

The experience-fed changes to a product's content over time may take shape as adaptations of a consultancy's formal knowledge system (Werr et al., 1997; Morris and Empson, 1998; Olivera, 2000) or, arguably more importantly, adaptations to a consultant's cognitive representations (Røvik, 1996). Obviously, this affects the way consultants perform their services, as one consultant rightly noted: 'of course we got a richer experience and that is used in new projects. On the one hand because the same people do BPR-like projects and take their project experiences from the past. On the other hand we also have knowledge management.' [consultant# vii] By performing assignments under a commodity's banner consultancies are able to obtain experiences that allow them to further develop a specific repertoire in various ways. Firstly, and most visibly, feeding back experiences into codified traces may enhance performance in future projects (Morris, 2001) and contributes to enhancing a repertoire that will support consultants in gaining a favorable impression (Clark, 1995). As a result, consultants may see a: 'continuously developing standard [BPR] method' [consultant# xxix]. This would mean that a product's content cannot be seen as stable entity but changes are continuously incorporated into the phase models, techniques and case descriptions and stored into different carriers such as manuals and databases:

‘Our internal [BPR] manual was continuously adapted. At the same time we stored it in a knowledge and experience database within which the expert techniques, the people who generated experiences with it as well as the cases were described and became worldwide available.’ [consultant# xiii]

Secondly, experiences in the application of a commodity may not only affect a consultancy’s formal knowledge systems but also take shape as cognitive representations (Røvik, 1996) of the individual consultant. These representations refer to personal learning that people underwent during consultancy projects related to a commodity. An important part of a consultant’s work cannot be captured by codified representations but can only be generated by repeatedly moving through the realization of ideas (Werr, 1999; Morris, 2001; Visscher, 2001). The accumulation of experiential traces support the ability to translate a commodity into praxis and thereby modifies the way consultants perform their services:

‘On an individual level, I constantly take my project experiences with me by always evaluating and improving. So I will approach things differently in time. […] The consultant as an individual learns most and will experience that BPR constitutes a minefield. I also frequently stepped on a mine, but that is a form of learning and that is an individual experience.’ [consultant# xviii]

New concept development

When a commodity reaches its downturn phase, consultants may replace it by developing new knowledge products (see Figure 1). These development efforts entail translating ‘new’ management ideas into a consulting repertoire to support the commercialization and implementation of a knowledge commodity (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2002). The current section seeks to discuss some important implications of new concept development for marketing and product content within a consultancy.

Presenting new service offerings unavoidably requires consultancies to realize changes in their marketing efforts. The managerial discourse (Furusten, 1999) is regarded as an important arena for sensing relevant topics in the market, but also as a means in trying to align themselves with new management ideas. Consultants stress the importance of taking advantage of the attention for new terms on the market and hereby tend to pragmatically ‘hitch’ a ride on it’ (Benders et al., 1998). In other words, consultancy is not simply a matter of sensing the market and being aware of the latest terms, but also of using discourse to the consultancy’s advantage in case of a new product: ‘Every client that called only wanted to hear E-something and of course as a consultancy you will sell E-everything.' [consultant# xxiii] Conveying the impression as a consultancy that you remain state-of-the-art by marketing new products particularly involves using the right terminology. Consultants stress the importance in their marketing efforts to relate their specific expertise to new and legitimate terms in the managerial discourse:

'If you notice that a concept is starting to become popular you focus your marketing on it and make sure that your sales staff uses the right terminology because a term that is new just sells well.' [consultant# x]

The development of new knowledge products also has serious implications for the grouping and coupling of internal knowledge items within consultancies. More specifically, new concept development does not only involve changes at a nominal level but also a reconfiguration of the existing consulting repertoire into 'new folders'. As one consultant explains: 'Within for example E-commerce there will be a new folder that include partly those old re-polished techniques. Nobody will take the effort to make those changes into the BPR folder, that is considered a closed case.' [consultant# xxii] As we illustrate in the remainder of this section, these folders induced by the uptake of new commodities provide important opportunities for the traces of previous commodities to be re-used while at the same time may cause important barriers to their longevity within a consultancy.

Traces of a commodity in its alleged downturn phase may still be regarded useful and continue to be applied as part of a new commodity. Seen from within a new knowledge product, consultants view the value of traces associated with old commodities (Ortmann, 1995). This may imply that some parts of the current ideas and techniques readily flows into new clusters of expertise. For instance one consultant saw that: 'So BPR got absorbed into the current issues like E-business. We see a huge future for BPR as the bulk of the real work behind E-business projects.' [consultant# ix] So traces of previous knowledge products are selectively drawn upon and may become regarded as rudiments for a new configuration of consultancy services. The creation of a new folder even allows keeping 'old' technology viable, though in a more selective fashion. To a certain extent traces of prior concepts are seen to make consultancies more prepared to become easily fashionable again with 'new' consultancy services (Røvik, 1996). Consider the following statement:

‘In parts of assignments I still use the things I learned at [consultancy] and with the application of BPR. […] In fact you use many things you’ve learned there, only then specifically applied to the subject of Mergers.’ [consultant# xxi]

The presence of different traces of previous commodities is not enough to become drawn upon in a next ‘cycle of management knowledge production’ (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). The data shows that consultants also perceive various barriers that obstruct re-using traces of ‘old’ commodities and incorporating them as part of a new service.

A first perceived barrier to re-use is constituted by the hastiness with which new commodities are brought to the market. Consultants indicate that the required time-to-market often does not allow the extensive research of present knowledge: ‘Something that we have never developed into a proposition via the development funnel is the concept of Shared Service Centers. […] Yet unexpectedly a demand emerges and it suddenly becomes topical. Because of this, we’ve gained some experience and knowledge of that concept, not by doing elaborate research or developing certain methods, but more or less the hard way, that is, in actual practice.’ [consultant# xix] Consultancies run the risk that demand for a concept wanes within a short period of time, urging them to respond quickly. This may lead then to the re-invention of knowledge during assignments in client organizations and indicates that the eagerness for novelty tends to limit the opportunities for accumulation within consultancies.

A second barrier is that traces from previous commodities easily become contaminated as they are become too much associated with ‘old’ knowledge that is no longer considered as relevant. The specific connotation and lack of attention in the knowledge market makes certain knowledge manifestations less appealing. This may not only result in a discontinuation of the label usage but also a decline in the consulting praxis that has been built up around a knowledge product. Consultancies hereby tend to neglect or dismantle their market entry for an old concept thereby reducing their efforts in the development of management knowledge:

‘If you were now to go to [consultancy] with a BPR question, their first reaction would be to rummage around in their drawers, and I wonder whether they would come up with an answer, as they no longer have any ready knowledge of it. Like myself, most of the people I’ve trained have already left [consultancy], which shows how transient the consultancy business is.’ [consultant# xviii]

Consultancies are also confronted with internal staff who are unable or unwilling to continue using various traces in their practice. Due to turnover and decreased interest in the market, consultants may no longer recognize traces from old commodities as useful in new assignments: ‘Early this year I have thrown away large files of BPR examples. I am unable to pass it on to other people. I haven’t got time for it nor does it appeal to young people who have recently joined our firm.’ [consultant# xvii] As a result, the development of new commodities increases barriers for learning from the previous. New commodities do not build on present traces because they are carried by different generations of consultants. This means that it may provide a new group of consultants with an opportunity to strongly dissociate themselves from established consulting practices: ‘In a sense the Information Planning hype was the logical predecessor of the BPR hype, but we did not want to have anything to do with the group of people associated with it.’ [consultant# xxi] Explicitly distancing oneself from the old fits with the need to be new. However, this easily limits learning from the experiences obtained under earlier knowledge commodities:

> ‘Data Management was a trendy subject in the early 1980s and ideas and experiences have been written down extensively in course materials and different books. Yet, because of the dynamics around the latest hypes this *old* knowledge does not get much attention anymore. So certain issues remain relevant, but there is a major risk that people are going to re-invent the wheel because although the *old* knowledge might be present it is not *alive* enough.’ [consultant# viii]

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study sought understand how consultants handle their knowledge products in order to gain insight about what happens during an alleged downturn phase. Therefore we explored the possibility that a commodity’s evolution is regarded as open-ended. Theorists often stress consultants’ prominent role on the market for management knowledge (Clark and Fincham, 2002; Faust, 2002). By developing and promoting new commodities consultants seek to stimulate demand for their services and build a reputation as innovative knowledge provider (Kipping, 1997). It is indicated that there is still little known about evolution of knowledge commodities within its main suppliers. The current literature does not elaborately deal with the later life cycle stages allegedly leading to an inevitable termination of a commodity. At the same time, the bell-shaped patterns hypothesized by management fashion theorists suggest that important suppliers of management knowledge are unable to develop strong bases for entrenchment of management knowledge (Zeitz et al., 1999). In the above we indicate that a commodity’s elements may still be considered useful by consultants after an alleged downturn in the market. In addition, we illustrated how allegedly short-lived management fashions may be reshaped in different ways which allows consultants to extend the longevity of their services beyond the knowledge product they were initially associated with.

Our approach in this paper differs significantly from earlier accounts studying the evolution of management knowledge commodities and thereby sought to address some of their shortcomings (Clark, 2004). Rather than studying print media impact of a commodity over time, we focused on one of the major management knowledge suppliers and examined how they perceived the product replacement process. In other words, the current study adds another layer to the supply side of management fashions by offering an internal perspective of consultants as one of its main actors. We believe that moving the empirical evidence beyond the study of print-media allows generating more advanced implications for discussions about management fashions and management consultancies (see also Watson, 2001; Benders, Heusinkveld and Nijholt, 2004; Clark, 2004):

First, in the current literature it is hypothesized that knowledge commodities follow a single and predetermined life-cycle pattern that unavoidably result in their downturn (Gill & Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). This may easily support the notion that knowledge suppliers collectively reject a product that has been embraced only a short time before and are unable to develop strong bases for knowledge entrenchment. However, this paper identified and illustrated alternative replacement strategies that increase the longevity of a knowledge commodity. Key to these strategies are the changes to a product's (1) marketing and (2) underlying repertoire that allows more continuity than the transient patterns in print media studies would suggest. Also, these strategies illustrate some key elements that determine how management knowledge develops in time within knowledge producers, an issue we feel requires more attention in future research.

Secondly, by regarding the way consultants perceive a commodity's alleged downturn we are able to offer an alternative view on transience and persistence in management knowledge. Unlike what is suggested by current management fashion literature, consultants do not regard fashionable knowledge products as inherently perishable. Rather, our study revealed how the evolution of management knowledge is considered as open-ended and emphasizes the role of human agency in shaping this process. Specifically, the consultants' alternative strategies allow for a variety of possible evolution patterns of management knowledge. This does not only echoes the notion that neither the beginning nor the end of a knowledge commodity is as abrupt as suggested by studies of print media, but provide some important clues as to how this may take shape within knowledge producers.

Thirdly, we believe that this study reflects the need to place greater emphasis on processes within knowledge suppliers and consumers that shape the evolution of management knowledge (Stjernberg and Philips, 1993; Clark, 2004; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). Insights from product marketing literature enabled us to understand alternative ways in which knowledge producers seek to extend the longevity of their products. Further research could consider the antecedents of the alternative strategies that were identified: what factors determine whether a consultancy follows a specific strategy and not another? To what extent it is possible to combine distinct strategies and what are the consequences in terms of consultancy performance and knowledge accumulation? At the same time it indicated a specific interpretation of the replacement process by consultants particularly resulting from the lack of knowledge commodities' material component (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Clark, 2004). More specifically, our study revealed that the consulting repertoire underlying knowledge commodities cannot be regarded as a stable entity, but is continuously shaped and re-shaped with more ease than what might be expected from substantive innovations (Rogers, 1995). The paper shows that it is particularly this easiness with which management knowledge is relabeled or reconfigured (Benders and van Veen, 2001) is regarded as a major condition for discontinuity while at the same time allow more persistence in management knowledge. This stresses the importance of gaining further insight into the determinants that shape the evolution of management idea in the knowledge supply system.

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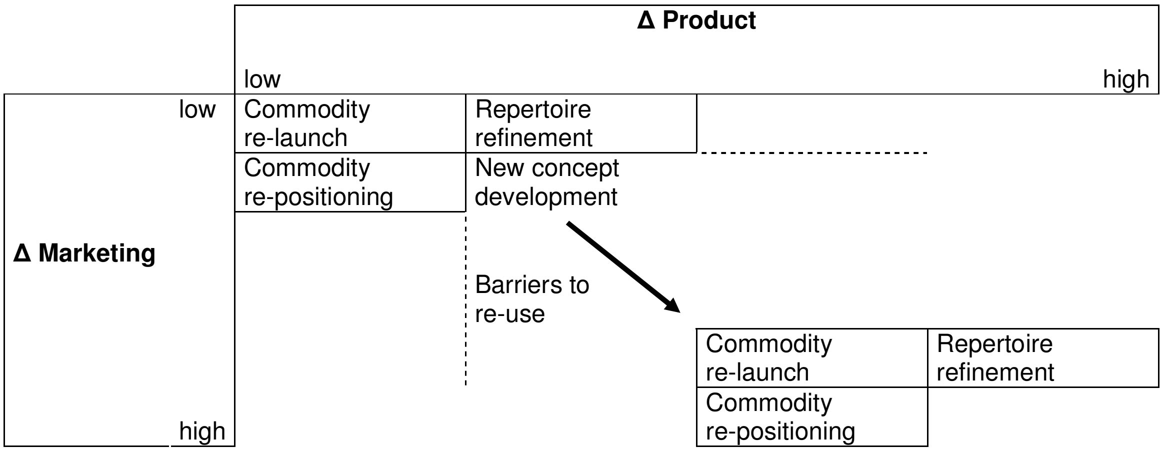
Figure 1. Replacement strategies in management consulting



Appendix: Overview of interviewed consultants

Consultant #	Firm	HQ	Background	Date
i	A	national	IT	October 5, 2000
ii	A	national	IT	March 23, 2001 January 31, 2002
iii	B	national	General Management	October 27, 2000
iv	B	national	General Management	January 2, 2002
v	C	national	IT	October 5, 2001
vi	D	international	IT	September 7, 2000
vii	D	international	IT	October 12, 2000
viii	E	national	IT	July 10, 2001
ix	E	national	IT	July 10, 2001
x	F	national	IT	July 18, 2001
xi	G	international	Accounting	August 4, 2000
xii	G	international	Accounting	August 4, 2000
xiii	G	international	Accounting	March 2, 2001
xiv	G	international	Accounting	March 6, 2001
xv	H	national	HRM	October 12, 2000
xvi	H	national	HRM	February 2, 2001
xvii	I	international	Accounting	November 12, 2000
xviii	I	international	Accounting	March 23, 2001
xix	J	national	Strategy	February 22, 2001 March 1, 2002
xx	J	national	Strategy	March 22, 2001
xxi	J	national	Strategy	February 20, 2001
xxii	K	international	Accounting	August 14, 2001
xxiii	K	international	Accounting	February 1, 2002
xxiv	L	national	General Management	March 9, 2001
xxv	M	national	General Management	September 15, 2000
xxvi	M	national	General Management	March 1, 2001
xxvii	M	national	General Management	May 1, 2001
xxviii	N	national	General Management	September 7, 2000
xxix	N	national	General Management	Januari 12, 2001