

MUNDANE PRACTICES AND THE PURSUIT OF STRATEGY

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Abstract

The Strategy-As-Practice (SAP) turn in the strategy literature has brought into focus the strategizing activities of managers, revealing, on the one hand, the significant role of non-conventional actors such as middle or frontline managers, customers or other extra-organizational actors in the strategy process, while also bringing out the significance of material objects with which strategizing activities are necessarily carried out. The expansion of relevant strategy actors and their activities has, however, broadened the ambit of strategy work and made the strategic-functional distinctions in extant understanding problematic. While early strategy scholars comfortably enquire into actors and activities associated with the top management, expanding boundaries to actors and activities beyond top management led to the blurring of the existing distinction of strategic management as a field, revitalizing the age-old question about ‘What’ is strategy? And ‘Who’ are strategists? The materiality turn in the literature, on the other hand, with an enhanced focus on objects rather than activities (or practices) of human actors (managers) has led to conceptualizations, such as that of the ‘foundational strategy object’ that plays a significant role in transmitting the strategy content or the ‘what’ of strategy by encapsulating the core purpose of the organization. The twin developments in SAP, thus, has created grounds for new conversations between the ‘what’ and ‘who’ of strategy work. In this work, I draw on ethnography of the distribution practices of a leading India-based textile ‘fashion’ brand where the ‘what’ of the fashion strategy of the focal firm was materialized in the foundational strategy object of ‘design sets’ stocked by thousands of independent multi-brand retailers (extra-organizational actors) across the country who remain embedded in settled practices of procurement. The focal organization, thus, had to draw from extant settled practices in creating its foundational strategy object along with extra-organizational actors and cope with their local ‘intelligibility’. This context provided us with a theoretical case where the construction of the foundational strategy object far

outside the focal organization boundary can enable us to observe interactions between the ‘what’ of strategy and the activities of strategizing by non-conventional actors. We use Schatzkian site-ontology, especially its distinction between ‘material-arrangements’ and widely shared field ‘practices’ as distinct, yet entangled and intertwined mechanisms to map and reveal the dynamics behind the ‘intelligibility’ of activities of non-conventional strategy practitioners, such as independent retailers and wholesaler sales boys who in our case seemed to construct the foundational strategy object of ‘wide design set’ at the retail site materializing the fashion strategy of the focal firm. In particular, we identify two types of mechanisms that the focal organization employs to deal with extant local practices: artefactual creation of foundational strategy object at one set (resource unconstrained retailers) of retail site, i.e. where material artefacts and their arrangements suffice to establish a causal relationship to create the foundational strategy object, and conversational creation of foundational strategy object at another set of retail site (capital and retail space constrained), i.e. where materials alone failed to build a causal relationship with the foundational strategy object (the wide design set at the retail store) and conversational interactions (or sayings during wholesaler-retailers sales interaction) turned out to be crucial in establishing prefigurational relations with the successfully constructed ‘wide design set’ at the retailer site. In the first mechanism, the focal organization could draw on well-settled practice of fashion [designer *kapda*/(trans. clothing)] procurement through artefactual intervention at the site, while in the second case, the artefactual intervention wasn’t sufficient as retailers were not settled into practices of fashion procurement and lacked its practical understanding. Conversation (or sayings) enhanced the practical understandings that could slowly form the background of local intelligibility to push fashion-based procurement and merchandising at the retail site. The functional activities of sales and distribution (of sales boys; non-conventional strategy actors) were strategic in the second case since, in its absence, the focal organization could not prefigure the ‘wide design set’, while in the case of resource unconstrained retailers, sales boys played the conventional/functional role of sales push and the foundational strategy object was created through the crafting of artefacts that were under focal organization’s control. This study contributes to the SAP literature by bringing in new evidence on a case where the foundational strategy object is constructed beyond the organization boundary. It thus broadens the question of 'who' does strategy work. Additionally, it also suggests the key to identifying the ‘strategic’ nature of an activity, or the age-old question about ‘what’ makes an activity strategic, to be in the linkages between activities, and scholars must focus upon

the interaction between actors linking the activity through varied levels of agency to decipher it further. By bringing out the difference in mechanism of how practice-arrangement bundles work at the social site based on differences in locally settled practices of extra-organizational actors, it also provides guidelines on how Schatzkian site ontology can be a useful conceptual tool to settle the question of who does strategy work in a more theoretically sound way.