

# Spontaneous Action and Everyday Practice in the Fashion Business

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## Abstract

*The specific nature of fashion industry change results in creativity and in the cyclical character of organisational processes that take place in the fashion business. Nevertheless routine activities are key factors in improving and maintaining everyday processes. This gives rise to the practice of day-to-day activities. Change to routine activities may be initiated by either planned or spontaneous actions. However, even spontaneous actions may be akin to the goals of the company and its brand identity. The objective of the present study was to examine spontaneous actions as categories of the institutionalization of practice. A comparative case study was conducted, key findings of which have implications for fashion business research and changes in management theory. If spontaneous actions are purposive, then they may become institutionalized within the framework of reproduced practice*

**Key words:** spontaneous actions, practice, change, fashion business.

## Introduction

The article is a theoretical and empirical presentation of the issue of spontaneous changes and their purposive character from the processual perspective in management. The aim of the article is to show spontaneous actions that are unplanned and yet in accordance with the organization's goals, which is why they get reproduced in day-to-day practice. The first part of the article – the theoretical part – is a relatively novel, useful cognitive perspective, being a Giddensian view on the issue of change (1984), referring to the works of Feldman, Pentland (2003), Dogherty (2008), Wenting (2009), and Rosso (2014). The theoretical part presents the notion of practice, its relationship with the concept of organizational routines, their change, and spontaneous actions that are of importance in the case of constant, cyclical change in the environment and changing expectations of customers, which are characteristic of the fashion industry.

The textile and clothing industry is a very demanding area characterized by cyclical fashion seasons and production processes as well as by volatile trends. The ever shorter lifecycles of fashion products result in a tight time schedule in apparel companies. Enterprises constantly develop the language of marketing communication and introduce new products. The second, empirical part of the work is an attempt to illustrate the empirical thesis that spontaneous actions can be purposive from the point of view of organizational practice, and then that they are subject to the process of change institutionalization in day-to-day reproduced practice.

Actions undertaken in the course of day-to-day activities constitute important elements of the institutionalization of practices within the framework of production and organizational functions implemented. They form a fundamental category in terms of sustaining the organizational structure. Nevertheless, not every routine action can be planned in minute detail and monitored. Organizations are thus located in a certain situational, cultural, and social context. Management consists of a series of decisions that are made in a way that is as close to optimum as possible for a given organization [1]. Actions and decisions of this kind, even if unplanned, are nevertheless often consistent with the system of values and practices that characterize the organization. Therefore, in reference to Merton's work, it should be noted that *unforeseen consequences should not be identified with consequences which are necessarily undesirable* [2]. A characteristic feature of factors initiating change in organizations is that they frequently go against the grain of routinely reiterated actions, processes, and day-to-day activities, disrupting a previously adopted plan or even imparting a new direction of action. However, they typically maintain their purposive character linked to brand identity, the continuity of organizational processes, and the need to secure an adequate level of sales in the fashion season. In the light of Giddens's theory, practice is not only a fundamental element of the development of social systems, but also of their change [3], as change is necessary to maintain the continuity of the system in an evolving external environment. The process of initiating changes and turning them into practices may proceed in a spontaneous or planned way. In the clothing and tex-

tile industry, the repeatable and routine nature of actions imposed by the rhythm of fashion seasons is connected with creativity. Spontaneous actions, whose role has been insufficiently explored to date in the context of apparel companies, may be considered an important category of processual change.

### A Giddensian view on spontaneous and purposive actions

The processual approach in management largely draws on Giddens's structuration theory [3]. Practice occupies a central place in the Giddensian vision of the development and change of organizational systems. According to Giddens, social practice is an *ongoing series of practical activities* [4]. Human actions *ordered across space and time* [3] are fundamental elements of the creation and change of social systems. Practice is replicated in day-to-day activities; it is reproduced and regular. At the same time, the most durable practices are termed *institutions* [3]. According to Giddens, the duality of structure is attributable to the fact that it is both the medium and outcome of practices [3] – structure shapes human practices, while practices shape and reproduce social systems. Structure consists of rules and resources [3], whereas practice consists of day-to-day actions that are organized into patterns or routines. Therefore structure is a category that both constrains and enables actions. In this sense, constraints and actions are mutually constitutive properties of social order [5]. Spontaneous, unplanned actions, which often emerge from activities previously undertaken in an organization, may initiate change in the course of routinely reproduced practices. In this area, Dougherty draws an analogy with other theoretical concepts associated with the processual tradition [5]. Examples include the bicategorical notions of routine proposed by Feldman and Pentland [6]. Routine has properties linked to instructions or unwritten rules that determine the constraints of actions. On the other hand, the so-called *performative* features of routine are linked to their internal dynamics and capacity for change under the influence of reflective and conscious reproduction of actions by critically thinking people.

A similar, but empirical rather than theoretical, analogy may be found in Went-

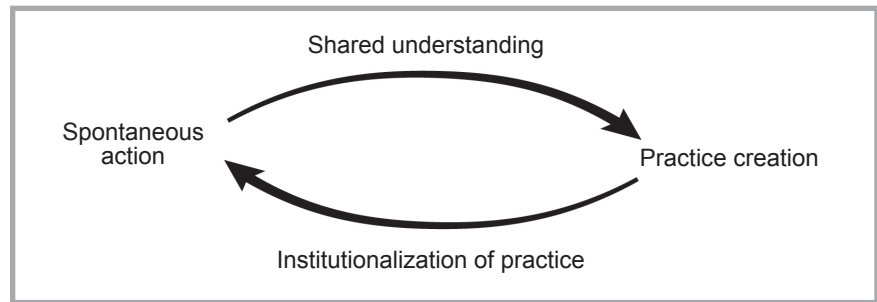


Figure 1. Process of institutionalizing spontaneous actions. Source: Author's own.

ing's work concerning the emergence of spin-offs and start-ups in the fashion design industry [7]. The choice of the subject matter of the study was inspired by the mechanism of routine replication, which is very pronounced in the fashion industry. Routine replication may concern creative processes – routines are initiated in every fashion cycle and tight schedule as well as shorter and shorter product life cycles [8]. It may involve designers and their experience in day-to-day routine work, which they bring to spin-offs.

Due to the specific characteristics of the fashion business, it is necessary to constantly launch new products, which requires flexibility, creativity, and fast decision-making. Apparel enterprises work to tight time schedules and such tension encourages the development of new routines and new product solutions. At the same time, these companies draw on the capabilities and resources accumulated over time, which must be, however, adequately modified and adapted to the seasonal cycle. Rosso [9] observes that time, financial and equipment resources, human resources, product requirements, customer needs, etc., constitute process and product constraints. Depending on a given situational context, such constraints may be beneficial for individuals and teams that do creative work [9]. In the fashion industry, creative work is conducted repeatedly in the context of fashion business dynamics. Tippman et al., representing the strategy-as-practice perspective, examine the problem of capability development and the emergence of new solutions in organizations. They claim that organizations possessing (developing) a *knowledge use advantage* have the ability to use their tacit and codified knowledge in the circulation process. Circulation is based on interaction (networking) mechanisms and ensuring a supportive climate for openness, which also involves the level of informal inter-

actions between workers. A knowledge use advantage is a prerequisite for mastering solutions to non-routine problems [10]. The knowledge and skills accumulated constitute the basis for developing new routines, becoming a functional category of understanding combined with acting. They are based on a collective understanding of the manner and purpose of actions, which may be termed a shared understanding [11]. In turn, the replication of these actions leads to the institutionalization of new practices in the organization, which evolves and provides conditions for the development of new solutions and new mechanisms of action (Figure 1). These processes are clearly visible in seasonal sectors governed by changeable trends, such as the apparel industry.

Within the Giddensian and processual approach, the concept of practice may be treated as a perspective that affords a view of change in an organization as a chain of actions that are specific to a given industry, coherent from the point of view of the company's strategy, but not necessarily planned or predictable. The practice-based approach allows for the possibility of routine and non-deliberate as well as purposive and spontaneous mechanisms of action [12]. Practice is understood as a string of routines implemented within day-to-day activities and processes. An important category of initiating change in a practice reproduced are spontaneous actions that may emerge in the course of creative use of mechanisms of action acquired or the adoption of new solutions for atypical situations. As Rasche and Chia observe, spontaneous actions are characterized by a *purposive* character [13]. Thus, referring to the Giddensian view of the reproduction of social systems, they may be understood as actions situated in the processual and historical context of the organization.

**Table 1.** Company descriptions. *Source:* Author's own.

Company
<b>Epsilon</b> Main market: : Clothing Production: Outsourced Design: Own Size: 15 employees Age: 5 years
<b>Zeta</b> Main market: : Pantyhose Production: In-house Design: Own Size: 150 employees Age: 30 years

## Methodology - research method and sample selection

In-depth interviews were conducted for the needs of the study. The cases were selected purposively according to the “soaking and poking” method, described by Fenno [14], based on the researcher’s knowledge and experience concerning the companies studied and the context in which they operate. The present paper presents a comparative analysis of companies oriented towards building and maintaining brand identity.

The study used heterogeneous sampling, which is a purposive sampling technique. Thus, the study is oriented towards the observation of a wide range of perspectives relating to the problem of spontaneous change and the way it becomes institutionalized. Heterogeneous sampling requires the purposeful sampling of cases that are as different as possible, making it possible to identify differences, and not only similarities.

The cases include a young company (Epsilon) and a company that has been active in the fashion market for a long time (Zeta). Both companies are susceptible to fashion trends, albeit each in a different way. The predominant market for the young company is clothing, whereas the older company operates in the pantyhose sector. According to Chen – Yu et al. [15], *consumer expectance for future performance was significantly determined by dis/satisfaction at purchase*, no matter whether they bought a jacket or pantyhose. This means that even in the case of different consumer responses at the purchase of different goods [16, 17], the experience related to the given brand matters. Nowadays, purchase decisions are often taken quickly, while brand awareness is a factor speeding up consumer choices. In the market, there

are nearly no “no name” products. Brand identity is thus an important marketing aspect of a company no matter whether the product is related to disposable goods (such as pantyhose) or clothing.

Epsilon does not have almost any in-house manufacturing; it outsources production and sells a collection that it develops on its own, whereas Zeta is primarily a manufacturer of designs developed in-house (**Table 1**).

The semi-structured interviews consisted of a preliminary part designed to determine the history of the companies and their characteristics. The other part, devoted to the subject matter of the study, was conducted according to loosely formulated interview guidelines concerning, e.g., the process of product development in a seasonal cycle, internationalization, and marketing activities. Data analysis consisted of transcription of the interviews recorded on a voice recorder, which were further supplemented by notes taken during the interviews and immediately after them. According to Creswell’s procedure for analyzing qualitative data [18], the material was read to establish the general meaning of the information. Subsequently, the material was coded to determine the main research themes (coding was facilitated by the partial structuring of the problems investigated). Informants in both interviews were owners of the enterprises.

## Brand identity and elements of marketing communication

### Epsilon

As a young fashion brand, Epsilon is oriented towards building brand identity, which is the key factor in differentiation and market segmentation. Customers who identify themselves with the brand, remember it, and are going to come back, which have been the basic elements of maintaining business continuity. The Epsilon brand arose out of the owners’ authentic passion for Polish design of the 1960s and 1980s, which they interpreted in a distanced way. First, the owners spontaneously set up a blog where they showed some inspiring symbols and motives, which in turn gave rise to a process of brand creation. Then the first products were developed. Brand identity corresponds to the specific characteristics of business operations – the development of relations between workers, which are

critical in day-to-day work on fashion products. In the case of Epsilon, this process is based on continual interactions and a shared understanding of esthetics. The selection of people who develop the brand is very careful and purposive. At the same time, it is a natural and spontaneous process based on the company’s background (it is strongly embedded in the community of designers). The spontaneous process of the selection of employees is intuitive (what matters is the interest in work, and not relevant education). The important things are skills and the ability to participate in shared understanding (Table 2). These are the very categories that are crucial to form organizational structure and processes:

*(...) we now simply have a designer who works full-time for us (...). It doesn't matter what school she graduated from. She simply has to be good (...). I don't hold a degree in this field, either. (...) for instance, our chief graphic designer, he is just fantastic (...). At any rate, probably none of Epsilon's workers is who they should be by education.*

A clearly defined brand, shared understanding, relations, and involvement give rise to practices within the scope of the activities reproduced. Routine actions are important categories of the process of accumulating knowledge and skills. These are the very basic elements of business operations from the owner’s perspective. The Epsilon brand is present on the Internet, which is used as a means of marketing communication and sales:

*(...) you have to be up to date. (...) You need to be on top of things, you need to do this on a daily basis, and if you don't, even for, say, nine months, then you get out of step; first of all you get out of step with new developments, with what it all should look like.*

Epsilon produced a short movie about the process of manufacturing its T-shirts that was awarded in the competitions *Show off – Business for Łódź* and *2011 Creativity Icons*. The video was posted on the Internet and played a very important role in promoting the brand on the market (**Table 2**). Routine actions are important for the development of marketing communication. At the same time routines may evolve and contribute to changes in practice. The spontaneity of the decisions and their implementation is constrained by the brand image. The success of the video could have led to the institutionalization of the practices developed in the



**Table 2.** Spontaneous actions, brand identity creation and marketing communication. *Source:* Author's own.

Company	Elements of spontaneous brand identity emergence	Spontaneous actions in marketing communication
Epsilon	<p><i>The process of brand identity initiation:</i></p> <p>It was spontaneous and preceded the emergence of the key product: (...) and after some time we started to make stuff (T-shirts) inspired by those old designs.</p>	<p><i>The main tools of marketing communication:</i></p> <p>Clearly defined brand identity determines the types of customers and the method of marketing communication relevant to them. Epsilon is a brand present on the Internet, using online and social tools in the process of communication with customers. In the case of Epsilon, it can be said that the process of brand identity creation was initiated as a result of proper marketing communication. The process was spontaneous and defined the business model assumed.</p>
	<p><i>Shared understanding of practice:</i></p> <p>Shared understanding is a key factor of building the brand identity. The selection of employees is spontaneous, making it possible to enhance the shared understanding of organizational values: (...) we recruit our team members in such a way that they are not random people, but they're friends of our friends. (...) Nobody who has education, I mean, in Epsilon, works in their field. (...) And you know, they have that interest which at some point has turned into... passion?</p>	<p><i>Shared understanding of practice:</i></p> <p>Shared understanding is a reason to constantly search for new ways of marketing communication: And you have to be on the lookout for new things all the time.</p> <p>Not every spontaneous action is institutionalized. Such actions need to be in accordance with the brand's vision and purposive, so that the team understands their implementation as justified. Many other projects were not shown either. At the same time, conceptual work in terms of marketing communication is conducted on an ongoing basis: Well, a great number of designs are shelved, that is, they do not get manufactured. (...) They are not released. So it is not the case that once you've come up with something, it will be automatically followed through.</p>
	<p><i>Examples of purposive and spontaneous actions that are akin to brand identity:</i></p> <p>In the case of the product development process, spontaneity is an important factor contributing to the introduction of new models. The company's work does not include seasonal collections. Nevertheless, although the models were created as spontaneous ideas, they form a coherent whole in terms of concept, defined by the brand identity: And sometimes what happens is that in the evening you come up with a design just like that, and to tell the truth a design may be developed in ten minutes.</p>	<p><i>Examples of purposive and spontaneous actions in marketing communication:</i></p> <p>Epsilon has built its brand identity based on a promo video awarded in the competitions Show off – Business for Łódź and 2011 Creativity Icons.</p>
Zeta	<p><i>The process of brand identity initiation:</i></p> <p>It is semi-spontaneous, i.e. the need to redefine the brand was acknowledged and planned by the company's owner. At the same time, brand identity renewal emerged spontaneously as a result of interactions between the organizational participants: So we just sat and did some thinking... What about "Zeta loves all women" – it's fantastic, because the name, that is, a male name, provides a great context – this guy loves all women, and that was it.</p>	<p><i>The main tools of marketing communication:</i></p> <p>The process of brand identity renewal involved a new perception of the company and its customers by the owner: You know, I'm no longer 20, I've outgrown those ads which show a pretty young girl with long legs. When you look at people on the street you can see that there are not only those girls. (...) We (women) are different, we are of different ages, we have different figures, we have health and weight problems, and this inspired me to take up these issues and pro-social ads. I have simply become mature enough for this kind of advertising, and that's why I'm continuing it.</p>
	<p><i>Shared understanding of practice:</i></p> <p>In the case of the product development process, renewal of brand identity corresponds to the introduction of new products. New models correspond to a renewed vision of customers:</p> <p>We were just launching that product for plus size women.</p>	<p><i>Shared understanding of practice:</i></p> <p>The vision of marketing communication practice is to a large extent influenced by the company's owner. Based on previous interviews with other employees of the company it can be said that they approve of the concepts promoted by the owner. There is shared understanding of reproduced practice observed:</p> <p>I also have some ideas for strong ads, but I'm afraid.</p>
	<p>There are strong interactions between organizational participants in the case of the product development process:</p> <p>One day I talked to Weronika, who works with us, and she says, you know, we could make pantyhose in the form of a corset. So I said, sure, it would be great.</p>	<p><i>I'm simply afraid. I'm very brave, but I'm afraid of what will happen (...).</i></p> <p><i>We did not want to show the wheelchair all the time on wire fences, where billboards hang for a very long time, right? I didn't want it.</i></p>
	<p><i>Examples of purposive and spontaneous actions that are akin to brand identity:</i></p> <p><i>There is this yarn, that is, Invista (...) they launched the yarn Exceptional, which is fantastically stretchable and (...) you can make pantyhose without gussets. So you don't need to insert those fifty thousand gussets, which look unappetizing, right? (...) And this yarn - it has been used in such a way that the brief part is lengthened to mid-thigh, as it were. This is the thickest place in women, and the large sizes fit easily.</i></p> <p><i>I said, maybe we could add some lace here on the sides, so this gave rise to the idea. (...) I said, you know, but corsets are finished with lace here at the bottom, so let us try and add those laces and see what happens, because we are not sure for now.</i></p>	<p><i>Examples of purposive and spontaneous actions in marketing communication :</i></p> <p>Billboard campaigns are carefully prepared in terms of the assumptions of provocative ads. The first campaign of this type used an image of a plus size woman, and these actions led to a large increase in sales and interest in the brand. The following campaigns took up the issues of sexual orientation, disability, and addictions. Not all motives used in promotional campaigns build a positive image of the brand: Somebody wrote to us that we should remove it altogether, because it was disgusting, revolting. I'd rather people had positive and not negative opinions.</p> <p><i>All ideas emerged spontaneously:</i></p> <p><i>Believe me or not, but that model contacted us on her own. I was surprised that she wrote an e-mail saying that she would like to appear in our ad.</i></p>

area of promotional videos. Nevertheless this was not the case. The movie could have resulted in the institutionalization of the marketing communication domain. Epsilon attempted to carry out another project of the kind. However, it did not

become as popular as the first video. The strong brand image defined a high level of expectations concerning the form of marketing communication tools: But you know what, this is all changing visually. At the time, that video was, you

know, very fresh, right? Now there are dozens of such videos showing passion. (...) But new things don't necessarily catch on immediately. So we made another promotional video, but it did not come out as intended, so we don't show it.

Spontaneity constitutes a purposive *modus operandi*, which transfers to other important business areas, such as product development and the planning of apparel collections. Epsilon's work does not include regularly prepared collections. It has adopted a trendsetter strategy, according to which it shapes its environment, sets up trends, and defines what customers identify with:

*"Well, we simply don't know that. We produce as many pieces as it seems right, and then it may turn out there were far too few or too many. Sometimes I put in a lot of effort into a product, we work and work on it, and it's a flop, right? It doesn't sell, right? (...) And then a product is, well, quite the sales hit and becomes very, very much in demand, so that we need to manufacture more and more of it."*

### Zeta

When Zeta was established in the 1980s, the demand in the Polish market was not as varied as it is today. Moreover Zeta's leading product, pantyhose, is one of the least durable fashion products; indeed, it is almost disposable. Zeta's products have always been addressed to a broad target group of women, and it is still the case today. However, the process of brand identity formation and translating it into a product communication strategy intensified relatively recently. It was a purposive and planned move motivated by the desire to change and refresh the company's image in the market. However, the logical concept behind the promotional campaign emerged spontaneously, as a result of a discussion among the organizational participants. The process of brand identity renewal was thus semi-spontaneous (**Table 2**):

*Let me put it this way, it is no secret that the company is named after my son, right? And since previously we had the slogan "Zeta is my addiction," which I didn't like very much, so I sat there in your place and we were talking about what we could come up with to make it popular with a wider population.*

Zeta follows a very clear and strong marketing communication strategy, which is linked to the owner's belief in the promotion of certain values and is based on addressing difficult social issues. Zeta's marketing strategy resembles the provocative ads of Benetton. Thus outdoor advertising (billboards) is mainly used. The first campaign of this type was inspired by the figure of a plus size woman, which

was very well-received by the market. Zeta recorded a 50% increase in sales. Outdoor advertising has been continually implemented ever since, which has led to very good financial results, increased brand recognition, and good reception by customers. This gave rise to the process of turning marketing activity into a practice (**Table 2**):

*(...) everybody was buying, because the company got publicity.*

The outdoor campaign promoted a new product. Thus the purposiveness of these actions was predetermined by the product development plan, coherent with the owner's vision concerning the promotion of certain values and focussing on a canon of beauty that is unpopular in mass culture. Identity, product, and communication were elements of a clearly defined and planned brand re-entry strategy. Since the time of the first billboard ad, marketing activities have been reproduced on a regular basis and coincided with the launch of new collections. The mechanism of action has become institutionalized in terms of the use of marketing communication tools. However, the main advertising theme, and even the manner of its exploitation, emerged spontaneously. The second campaign used an image of a disabled singer. The idea for the latest ad with an alcohol-addicted model arose spontaneously and was originated by the model rather than by the company's internal environment, which is a special example of initiating change in a company. Nevertheless routinely reproduced schemata of action lead to brand recognition.

Advertising campaign planning coincides with the launch of new products and involves their purposive display on billboards. At the same time, product development is a largely spontaneous process of initiating changes in the course of routines reproduced on a daily basis. The manufacturing plant works 24 h a day. Non-participatory direct observation of the shop floor showed that those processes are automated, repetitive, and subjected to technical control. Importantly, in terms of designing, the processes are characterized by creativity based on dynamic capabilities. New product development is a consequence of a spontaneous combination of equipment and human resources as well as a shared understanding of practice:

*We draw a lot of inspiration from fabrics, underwear, and we combine ele-*

*ments, because there are panties, tops, corsets, so we take those patterns and try to translate them into pantyhose. Fabrics provide great opportunities. (...) It is difficult to come up with something new, so if this is the case, we show, as I said one day, these collections twice a year, and we are trying to set ourselves apart with patterns, or some elements which are hand-made.*

### Conclusions

The companies studied represent different models of turning spontaneous actions into practices. In the case of Epsilon, spontaneity is the dominant property of actions. Nevertheless spontaneous actions are of a purposive nature and are reinforced by a shared understanding of brand identity. A different type of decision spontaneity is represented by Zeta, a company which has been active for a long time.

Both cases reveal strong brand identity, although Epsilon, being a relatively young company, treats it as the foundation for all activities, including the decision to establish the company. Zeta, which is a company with a longer history, represents a special case of brand identity renewal. In both instances, spontaneous actions emerge on the basis of relations between organizational participants. Zeta's structure is more extensive – the shared understanding of practice concerns key workers. The companies make use of different tools of marketing communication (Internet vs. billboards). In Epsilon, work on marketing communication actions is totally spontaneous, while in Zeta it is semi-spontaneous. In both cases spontaneity concerns creative processes, leading to change in the routines and processes reproduced. To sum up, the spontaneity of actions is an important category shaping brand identity: it can initiate it, like in the case of Epsilon, but it can also be a factor reinforcing brand identity renewal. Shared understanding of practice is the key factor of the purposive nature of spontaneous actions, as not all spontaneous actions become day-to-day practice. A significant element in the process of institutionalization of spontaneous actions is the purposive nature of unplanned actions, which in this study was presented based on brand identity creation. Thus it can be assumed that the thesis of this study was confirmed empirically, proving that spontaneous actions can be institutionalized within

reproduced practice, as long as they are of a purposive nature from the point of view of organizational activity. A category conditioning the institutionalization of spontaneous changes is shared understanding of practice.

Companies in the clothing and textile industry operate on the basis of cycles and routines. The institutionalization of spontaneous actions within day-to-day practice is unplanned, and yet purposive. Spontaneity may serve as a foundation for company development, especially if the brand is young and oriented towards trend setting. Purposive characteristics of spontaneous actions are demarcated by brand identity and a shared understanding of the practice that is recreated in daily routines. Spontaneous actions may also play a major role in the process of renewal of a mature enterprise. A newly formed practice may then become a market-relevant category of enterprise differentiation. Factors initiating change of practice are based on planned as well as spontaneous actions.



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