

An Exploration of the Customer-seller Relationship Break-up by Precursor Signals: a Dyadic Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Everybody agrees to say that churn rates are becoming higher and higher. Furthermore, it is said that it is more cost effective to retain customers than to acquire them (Reichheld 1993). In this context, customer relationship management has become an important focus for firms. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that managing business relationships not only implies managing their development but also preventing their damage and their ending and, if needed, managing the dissolution. Previous research has explored drivers of customer defection (e.g. Keaveney 1995), business relationship ending factors (e.g. Prim-Allaz 2000) and also relationship dissolution processes in both consumer (e.g. Hocutt 1998) and business relationships (e.g. Halinen and Tähtinen 2002). Alajoutsijarvi, Moller and Tähtinen (2000) suggest that when trying to maintain a relationship, a firm may recognize precursor signals of a potential dissolution and then take adequate actions to restore this relationship. Therefore the aim of this paper is to shed light on how firms can anticipate the relationship break-up. In particular, the purpose is to outline the existence of relationship break-up precursor signals in the dissolution process and then to identify these signals. To confront this issue, we will review prior research on the dissolution process that provides reasons for believing that such signals exist. Then, with regard to prior research, the influencing factors of relationship dissolution, which help to identify precursor signals, will be presented. Following this, we will expose the research method (a set of qualitative interviews) and the main results. The main results and contributions of the paper are related to break-up anticipation. By analysing the speeches of salespeople and industrial customers, we outline that relationship break-ups can be detected before they happen. Actually, this research has determined that complaint behavior, information seeking, objective knowledge about alternatives and relationship neglect can be seen as precursor signals of relationship break-ups.

Keywords: Relationship break-up, dissolution, precursor signals, business to business.

Introduction

Customer relationship management has become an important focus for firms. Actually, managing a buyer-seller relationship is not a new phenomenon but it has become a strategic issue for managers to reach their goal, especially to retain customers. There is a general consensus that attracting new customers can cost five times as much as retaining existing customers (Berry 1995; Bolton 1998; Hart, Heskett and Sasser 1990; Johnson, Barksdale and Boles 2001; Langeard and Eiglier 1994). As a consequence, loyalty programs are becoming more important. However the efficiency of these programs can be questioned (Benavent and Meyer-Waarden 2001) since defection rates in different sectors (for instance in the telecommunications sector) are still increasing.

In this context, customer relationship management has become an important research topic :one of the MSI priorities since 1999. Academics (e.g. Bendapudi and Berry 1997; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Ganesan 1994; Gummesson 1987) have focused on the development and the maintenance of the buyer-seller relationship. However, another key issue in relationship management concerns the dissolution of the relationship. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that managing business relationships not only implies managing their development but also preventing their damage and their ending and, if needed, managing the dissolution. Previous research has explored factors explaining customer defection (e.g. Keaveney 1995), business relationship ending factors (e.g. Prim-Allaz 2000), and also relationship dissolution processes in both consumer (e.g. Hocutt 1998) and business relationships (e.g. Halinen and Tähtinen 2002).

Alajoutsijarvi, Moller and Tähtinen (2000) suggest that when trying to maintain a relationship a firm may recognize precursor signals of a potential dissolution and then take adequate action to retain this relationship. Therefore, an interesting question which arises is whether we can anticipate a relationship break-up. That is, can we identify relationships that are at risk of dissolution? If one bases oneself on customer behavior and/or communication during the dissolution process, can firms anticipate customer departure? Berry (1995) argues that by reducing customer loss, firms can increase their market shares. Therefore, by anticipating customer departure, firms might reduce customer defection in a proactive way and thereby increase their market shares.

To confront this issue we focus in this paper on business service relationships. First of all, customer relationship management is important in services. According to Lovelock (1983), the nature of services (i.e. intangibility and the perceived risk associated) implies continuous delivery and therefore ongoing relationship development. Secondly, industrial purchasers often develop ongoing relationship, thus "the importance of relationships in marketing is more clearly seen in industrial markets" (Webster 1992, p. 6). Finally it is easier to identify customers who have switched to competitors in business relationships than in consumer relationships (Perrien, Paradis and Banting 1995).

The purpose on this paper is first to outline the existence of relationship break-up precursor signals in the dissolution process and then to identify these signals. The literature section will discuss prior research on the dissolution process that provides reasons for believing that such signals exist. Then, with regard to prior research, the influencing factors of relationship dissolution, which help to identify precursor signals, will be presented. Following this, the last part will present the results of an exploratory qualitative analysis on the perceptions of salespeople and industrial customers of relationship break-ups.

Theoretical background

Research concerning the buyer-seller relationship has mostly concentrated on its establishment and evolution. This has led to a lack of studies on the dissolution relationship topic. However it is important to review some main conceptual contributions on the relationship development process to enhance our understanding of the relationship break-up.

The relationship dissolution: the last, but not the least stage in the relationship development process

Relationships have been defined in marketing literature as long term ongoing interactions between two parties where both partners derive benefits from their establishment (e.g. Berry 1995; Grönroos 1994; Hakansson and Wootz 1979). Investigating the relationship process, academics have argued

that they evolve in distinct stages. Grönroos (1980) proposed a relationship life cycle originally called “marketing circle” to describe the long term nature of the establishment and evolution of the relationship. In managing customer relationships, firms must consider three stages :interest to the company and its offerings, purchase of the offerings, and repeat purchase of the same or similar offerings, provided by the firm. In each stage, firms must take actions to guarantee the process in order to keep the customer within this circle.

In business literature, Ford (1980), Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) and Wilson (1995) also have conceptualised the buyer-seller relationship as a process. The authors (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Ford 1980) introduce then the possibility of dissolution within their relationship development framework. The recognition of a dissolution stage in the relationship development has implication on its management. The firm should manage the dissolution stage as well as the other phases of the relationship. We believe that managing dissolution also involve trying to anticipate the break-up of the relationship.

At this point, it is important to note that relationship dissolution literature is characterised by different terms to describe the concepts. The multitude of terms could create some confusion on these concepts and should be differentiated. Thus, in order to avoid confusion on the concepts used in this paper, we briefly present and discuss, in the next section, the different terminologies used in the literature.

Dissolution terminology

Reviewing relationship dissolution literature we can see the many terms which have been employed to describe the phenomenon. Unfortunately, there is little consensus regarding which term is most appropriate to use. According to Tähtinen (2002), the absence of consensus on the terminology is due to the recent development of the relationship dissolution theory. In our point of view, the different terms used do not refer to the same concepts. Following Prim-Allaz (2000), we make a distinction between the terminologies referring to a process and the terminologies referring to the physical break-up of the relationship as presented in table 1.

Terminologies	Sources	
Reference to a process	Dissolution	Duck (1982) Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) Perrien, Paradis and Banting (1995) Ping (1999) Pettersen (2001) Hocutt (1998) Coulter and Ligas (2000)
	Ending	Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) Tähtinen (2002)
	Disengagement	Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987)
	Termination	Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987)
	Withdrawal	Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987)
Reference to the last stage of the dissolution process	Break-up	Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987)
	Defection	DeSouza (1996) Johnson, Barksdale and Boles (2001)
	Discontinuation	Liljander and Strandvik (1995) Lemon, White and Winer (2002)
	Exit	Ping (1999)
	Divorce	Perrien, Paradis and Banting (1995)

Table 1- Dissolution terminology in the literature

Moreover, the term dissolution¹ is more adequate to describe the process in which the break-up can occur. Therefore, in our research we use the term dissolution to design the process by which the relationship ends, and break-up to design the fact that the relationship is broken. We argue that the break-up refers to a state which is included in the dissolution process.

¹ Dissolution is defined in the dictionary as decomposition into fragments or parts; disintegration. This definition refers more to an evolving process than to a state.

In the next section we first focus on the relationship dissolution process in order to explain that precursor signals exist. Secondly, we refer to prior research on factors influencing relationship break-up relevant to identify these signals.

The relationship dissolution as a process

Academics have conceptualised the relationship dissolution as a process. This process is complex and contains several stages. Different models have been conceptualised which explain the main stages resulting in the relationship break-up. Among these models, we will present and discuss those which are relevant for our conceptual framework, which concerns service business relationships. We are then at the intersection of two fields: service literature and business to business literature. Therefore, we first refer to the relationship dissolution in service literature and then we will analyse a dissolution model of business relationships.

Dissolution of service relationships

Among the different models, two have especially retained our attention: the model of Roos (1999a) and the model of Coulter and Ligas (2000).

Roos (1999a; 1999b) explores dissolution, in B to C, between a customer and his/her supermarket and proposes the TISPO model.

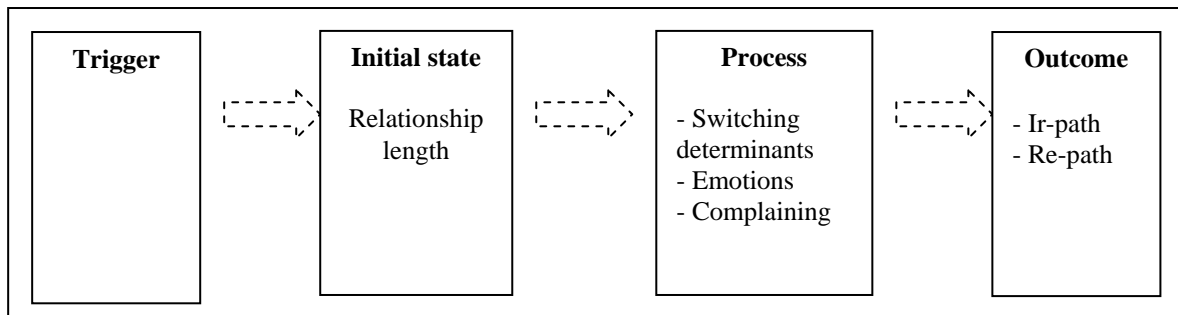


Figure 1- The TISPO² model, Roos (1999a, p. 113)

Roos defines the **trigger** as “any factor that alters **the current state of the relationship** in such a way that the switching path is initiated” (p. 114). The more important characteristic is that Roos considers that this factor “starts the path and provides energy direction, but is necessarily not the only reason why the relationship is switched. It is the ‘alarm clock’ that wakes up the customer” (p.114). It means that these triggers are very important in a diagnostic perspective and therefore for anticipating the break-up. The existence of the triggers sheds light on the possibility to anticipate the break-up since it is not sudden. There are several phases between the trigger and the break-up during which the firm can try to repair problems and restore the relationship.

Then the **switching process** is described according to its length and its determinants. In that stage, customers may be engaged in complaining which can be seen as a hidden form of exit. Finally, the switching path can lead to two different **outcomes**: the customer can either terminate the relationship or maintain it after a successful recovery process.

The contribution of this model is double: it integrates a first stage, the trigger, which can be considered as an alert. Negative customer feelings concerning service encounters are not expressed but still exist. This suggests that, before being expressed, dissatisfaction or other elements influencing break-up, exist in the dissolution process. Secondly, it contains a single stage in which the customer expresses his/her intention to leave (during the termination process). Research on complaint behavior and service recovery (Hart, Heskett and Sasser 1990) brings out that when complaining, customers offer the opportunity for the firm to react and maintain the relationship. Complaint behavior can then be considered as an explicit way for the customer to express his/her intention to leave.

² Triggers, Initial State, Ptrocess and Outcome

Academics agree to say that the dissolution process can go through all the stages or be abrupt, the break-up then being sudden. In this context, Coulter and Ligas (2000) have focused on the long exit of customer-service provider relationships. They identify three distinct stages in the long-exit process.

The **dissolution stage (1)** consists of three components. As in the model of Roos, the process starts with **breakdown trigger**. It can be core service failure, service encounter failure, or ethical problem. Then the relationship goes through the **breakdown phase** which is defined as “a period of time after the breakdown trigger in which the service relationships continue” (p. 686). During this period, customers are engaged in little complaining but still examine switching costs associated with relationship break-up. Finally, the **determinant incidents** are the factors that “cause the customer to terminate the service relationship” (p. 687). The **exit stage (2)** refers to the exit strategies and the **post dissolution stage (3)** concerns the possibility for the customer to “resurrect the relationships”.

In this model, the breakdown phase is of particular importance for our purpose especially the fact that, customers examine switching costs without complaining. Then, it can be argued that the switching cost analysis is a manifestation of the intent to exit. We argue that a customer with no intention to breakup the relationship would have no reason to examine switching costs. However, it is difficult to determine if the customer is analysing switching costs. An alternative might be to consider perceived switching costs. We could then suppose that the higher perceived switching costs are, the less the customer plans to leave.

The dissolution process contains several facets: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. Changing behaviors during the process can represent a means for the firm to anticipate the break-up. Actually, customer doesn't necessarily express his/her state to the firm, and it is important to anticipate this state in a prevention perspective. In her research related to consumer-brand relationship, Perrin-Martinenq (2003) postulates that dissolution process involves a brand detachment. If this brand detachment exists between brands and consumers, it is hard to think that industrial customers have these kind of feelings.

Business literature has also investigated relationship dissolution. Reviewing the main contributions permits one to examine the specificities due to the characteristics of business relationships.

Dissolution of business relationships

Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) have conceptualised the business relationships dissolution process. Their conceptual study puts analysis at a behavioral level rather than affective due to the particularities of the relationships between firms. The model proposed distinguishes seven stages.

During the **assessment stage**, individuals assess the relationship, its future and how it could be ended. The perceived switching costs are important in the assessment. If the break-up is not possible, the disengager will not continue and the relationship will be **restored**. In the opposite case, the relationship goes through the **decision-making stage**. There are two main strategies: exit or voice. “An exit ends the relationship and the disengager company may start to look for a new partner” (p. 173). On the other side, the voice strategy offers the opportunity to restore the relationship and the dissolution process may stop here. In the **dyadic communication stage**, the disengager communicates his/her intentions to the partner. At this point, “unless the parties agree to perform restoring actions, the relationship is likely to enter the **disengagement stage**” (p. 174). This stage is characterized by the decrease of business exchanges. The break-up is then **communicated to the network**. Finally, the last stage, **aftermath stage**, represents the fact that individuals “go through the ending process in order to make sense of what happened, and to evaluate what was achieved during the relationship” (p. 175).

This model sheds light on some behaviors of the disengager that might be characteristic of his/her intentions. According to us, the switching costs analysis in the assessment stage is of particular importance. The disengager can be engaged in information seeking to measure these costs. The decision-making and the dyadic communication stages are mainly characterized by communicating (e.g. complaining) or not, the intention to defect. Finally, the disengagement stage refers to the decrease of economic and business exchanges between partners and puts the break-up decision in concrete form.

Analysing these models, we find two main contributions for our research. First, they outline that dissolution should not be considered as a sudden event but rather as a process. Therefore, we argue that one can anticipate this break-up. Secondly, these models shed light on stages in the process in which the customer manifests, directly to the salespeople or indirectly, his/her intention to leave. This manifestation could be affective or behavioral. The second possibility draws our attention. We argue that customers plan their departure before the break-up. Ping (1999) distinguishes the exit-propensity from the break-up. In the first case, customers want to leave but still continue to exchange with the firm whereas the break-up represents the ultimate stage of the dissolution process. He specifies that “exit-propensity involves planning to leave” (p. 238).

Whatever the process conceptualisation, the literature review allows us to consider one or several stages in which the relationship is questioned in the dissolution process as shown below.

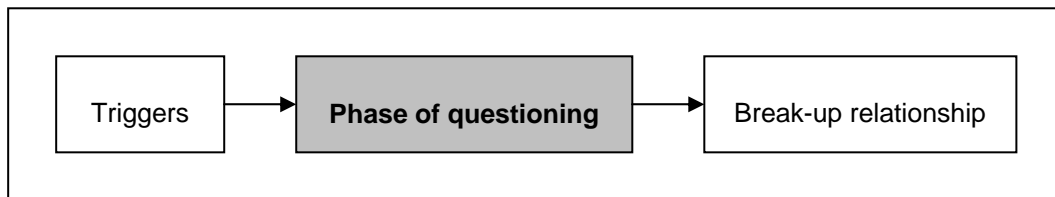


Figure 2- Relationship questioning phase in the dissolution process

Embracing the assumption that precursor signals of relationship break-up exist, our goal is now to identify them. If the different conceptualisations of dissolution process outline the possibility to anticipate relationship break-ups, none of them attempts to identify, in an explicit way, the revealing behaviors of the intention to leave. Identifying these behaviors is the purpose of the next section.

Anticipating the relationship break-up

Reviewing the dissolution literature, we have identified several behaviors that we argue have to be seen as precursor signals of relationship break-up.

The objective knowledge about alternatives

Capraro, Broniarczyk and Srivastava (2003) argue that though satisfaction and defection are related, satisfaction is only a weak predictor of customer defection. They suggest that for repurchase decision involving an information-based evaluation of alternatives of the incumbent, the consumer knowledge about alternatives will influence the likelihood of defection. They distinguish between subjective and objective knowledge. The former one is the number of instances of accurate information about alternatives stored in memory. Then seeking and gathering information, customers increase their objective knowledge about alternatives. Therefore, a break-up signal might involve objective knowledge and information seeking about alternatives. This is also consistent with the first stage of the Tähtinen’s model (2002) where considering their exit, customers seek information to analyse switching costs. From the preceding considerations, we argue that, controlling the level of satisfaction, the level of objective knowledge about alternatives and information seeking behavior are precursor signals of the relationship break-up.

The complaint behavior

Generally considered as an attempt on behalf of the customer to save the relationship, the complaint behavior has also been examined for its consequence on the relationship break-up (Bolton and Bronkhorst 1995; Solnick and Hemenway 1992). The authors find a positive relationship between complaint behavior and defection. Based on these studies, we suggest that complaint behavior can be a means for the customer to manifest, explicitly or implicitly; his/her desire to leave and therefore postulate that, when preceding the break-up, it can be considered as a precursor signal of the break-up. The question is when is complaint behavior a precursor signal of the break-up and when is it a “second chance” for the firm? It seems that when the answer of the firm to the complaining is judged satisfying by the customer, the relationship will be restored. Otherwise, the dissolution process will go ahead and the customer will plan the break-up by, for example, seeking information about alternatives.

Relationship neglect

The last signal that we introduce concerns relationship neglect. Ping (1993) pointed out the existence of a neglect stage of the relationship before the break-up. Neglect is defined as the reduced contact with the partner firm. According to Ping, neglect involves “not caring about the relationship, expending no effort to maintain it, and a willingness to let the relationship deteriorate” (Ping 1999, p. 221). It could involve reduced contacts and reduced social and/or economic exchanges.

All our hypothesis regarding precursor signals of the relationship break-up are drawn in the figure below. We argue that relationship goes through three main stages: 1) a phase of stability, 2) an intermediary stage which involves planning to leave and finally, 3) the break-up. We suggest that one can see that the customer is going through the intermediary stage by the complaint behavior. If the response of the firm to this complaining is judged satisfying by the customer, the relationship could be restored and go back to its stability state. Otherwise, the process starts and goes through the break-up planning phase. How can firms see that customers are in this stage? We argue that information seeking behavior can at this moment inform the firm. Finally, objective knowledge about alternatives and relationship neglect represent the signs that the customer has already planned to leave and s/he is going to break-up the relationship. That is, if the customer has a high level of objective knowledge about alternatives and/or neglects the relationship, one can say that s/he is leaving the supplier.

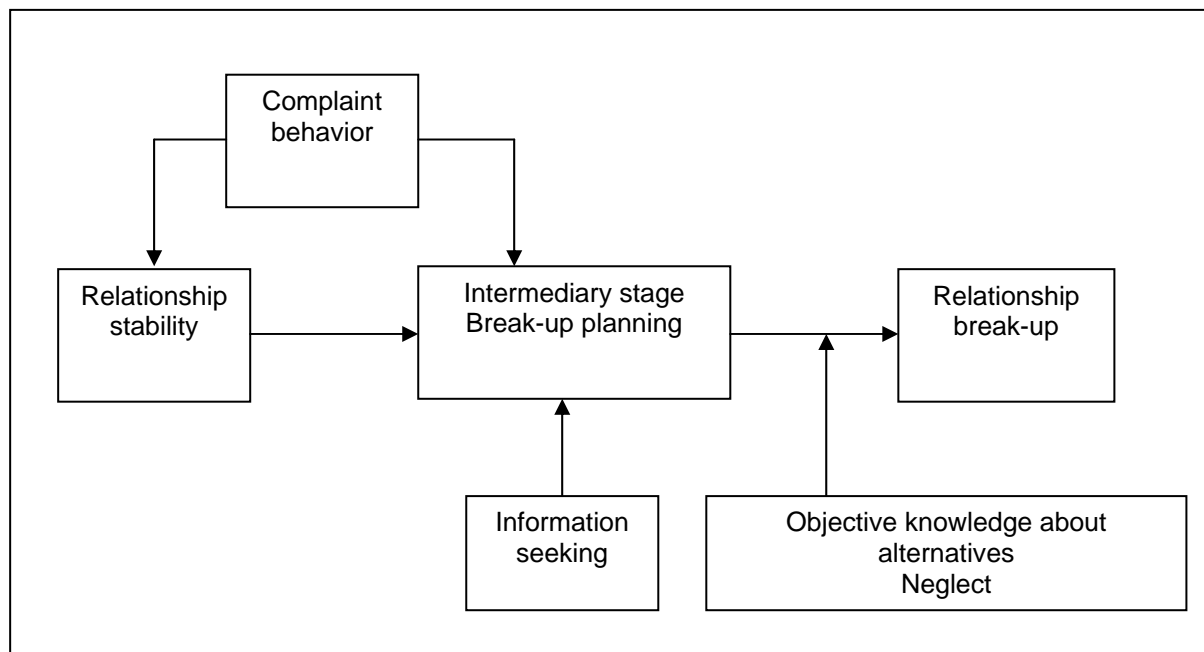


Figure 3- The main dissolution stages and the precursor signals associated

The aim of the empirical examination of this paper is to determine the existence of precursor signals of the break-up as postulated in our conceptual framework and their influence on the break-up. Actually, the literature reviewed has some limits. Mainly, most of the models reviewed are focused in B to C relationships. The only one which focuses on business relationships stays at a conceptual level. There are no empirical evidence of the existence of a questioning phase in the business relationship dissolution. Moreover, if this stage exists, it would be crucial to know how to identify it. We suppose that precursor signals of the break-up exist and could be detected. Therefore, the main objective of the empirical part of the paper is to prove that the break-up is not sudden and to identify the precursor signals of the relationship break-up.

Empirical research

Our research focuses on long-term, continuous, business relationships in service sector. Given the lack of literature related on the anticipation of relationship break-ups, we have chosen to conduct an exploratory qualitative analysis. Liljander and Strandvik (1995) suggest that “qualitative studies would

be needed to capture the perceived essence of a customer relationship. Studying a dynamic phenomenon does not have to be based on a research design where measurements are done at different points of time” (p. 159). Furthermore, to have a complete understanding of the phenomenon, we propose a dyadic analysis of the break-up.

The objective of the study

As we have already explained, the main objective of the empirical examination of the paper is to verify the existence of the relationship questioning phase and then to determine the existence of the precursor signals of relationship break-ups. To achieve this goal, we have chosen to have a dyadic approach: we have interviewed the salespeople and their industrial customers.

Research method

Regarding our dyadic perspective, we have proceeded in two steps. In the first step, we conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews with the salespeople of the company “La Poste”³. The interviews averaged 45-60 minutes and focused on salespeople’s preception of the relationship break-up. The objective of the interview was to understand the salespeople’s perception of how relationship break-ups appear. Therefore, the interviews were semi structured to follow the relationship evolution (starting from its formation to its break-up, if it occurred). Consistent with the objective of the paper we relate here the results concerning relationship break-up. Salespeople were especially asked if they had customers in their portfolios who had stopped their relationship with them. We explained the respondents that it could be either a total relationship break-up (customers who have left the relationship) or a partial break-up (customers who have stopped purchasing one category of services). Then the interviewer asked the informants how they thought the customer had ended the relationship. Finally, the respondents were asked if there were customers they consider at risk in their customer portfolios, and which elements allowed them to consider these customers at risk. We interviewed 13 salespeople in three different geographic areas in France.

In the second step, we conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews with industrial customers of the company. We interviewed the customers who were in contact with the salespeople we have interviewed in the first step. Moreover, the customers to be interviewed were chosen according to the probability of relationship break-up. We have interviewed customers who have broke-up the relationship and others that were at risk because of the existence of alternatives of the service they were buying. The interviews averaged 30-45 minutes and focused on industrial customers’ perception of the relationship break-up. We asked the same questions as those we asked to the salespeople. We asked the informants to explain how the break-up appeared if it had or to describe how they would proceed if they had to break-up the relationship with their supplier. We interviewed 18 customers in three different geographic areas in France.

To analyse the qualitative datas, we conducted a thematic content analysis.

Research findings

Given our choice of a dyadic approach, we first expose the results concerning salespeople point of view. We expose in a second section the results related to the industrial customers.

The salespeople’s point of view

Reviewing litterature, we have discussed several elements that could be considered as precursor signals of the break-up of customer-supplier relationships. These elements are the objective knowledge about alternatives, the information seeking, the complaint behavior and the relationship neglect. Our objective is to verify the existence of these supposed signals. We present these signals according to their importance in the informants’ speech.

³ In the French postal sector.

❑ Complaint behavior

We have supposed that complaint behavior was stated between the relationship stability stage and the intermediary phase. We have suggested that when the service recovery (which is the response of the firm to the complaining) is satisfying, the relationship will be retained to return to its stability level. On the other hand, if the recovery service fails, the complaining can represent the beginning of the break-up planning phase. The salespersons' answers are in line with our hypothesis.

The complaint behavior corresponds actually to a possible questioning of the relationship. First, because complaining represents customer dissatisfaction:

"When the customer often complains about the service quality. I mean is not satisfied with service quality, it's not good for the future of the relationships."

Complaining is often considered as an alarm given by the customer to make the supplier react :

"They say it clearly. They say it but it doesn't mean that they actually gonna leave but it's an alarm."

This alarm finally represents a "second chance" offered to the supplier and can, if the supplier takes this chance, strengthen the customer-supplier relationship:

"[they leave because of] service recovery failures ... it's not a relationship break-up because there is always a means to repair these problems. And it is generally due to this kind of problems that the relationships become stronger from the moment we manage to give an answer... a good answer."

Then, complaint behavior is first perceived as a "second chance" offered to the supplier to let him react. However salespeople are conscious that the recurrence of the same problems and therefore of the complaints are precursors of the customer leaving:

"In fact, you know, I really think that when s/he is leaving, the customer is not going to alert you. When s/he is not happy, when s/he calls you and screams, you can be sure that...you are not sure but you have a chance to retain him/her. You understand him/her, you say: "I understand, I'm going to do my best..." You give him/her a feed back. If after two, or three or four times the same problems occur, you can expect the customer to leave."

❑ Relationship neglect

Ping (1993) considers neglect as an emotional exit of the relationship which is defined as reduced contacts and social exchanges. Even more it could be the ignorance of the attempt of the firm to resolve the problems. To summarize, neglect refers to the degree to which the partner let the relationship deteriorate (Ping 1999). Although the neglect concept is little developed in the literature, it is relevant for the anticipation of the relationship. Ping (1993; 1999) gives a first measure composed of four items⁴, which is nevertheless too wide. For example, his measure doesn't explain what "letting the relationship slowly deteriorate" means. Therefore, our goal here is to examine the existence of relationship neglect and then, find concrete manifestation of neglect.

To better understand the concept of neglect and determine its existence, we have asked the informants to give details about customer behavior before the break-up. The analysis shows several

⁴ 1) I won't plan to do anything to improve relations with my primary wholesaler and will expect things will become worse, (2) I have quit caring about my primary wholesaler and will let conditions get worse and worse, (3) I will passively let the relationship with my primary wholesaler slowly deteriorate and (4) If things are not right with my primary wholesaler I sometimes consider letting the relationship die a slow death.

behaviors that help to define the relationship neglect. We focus on neglect to examine its manifestation and try to improve Ping's scale.

First, neglect as an emotional exit of the relationship is defined, according to the salespeople, as the customer silence. It is a change in the behavior:

"Before, when I was calling him/her, s/he was taking the call immediately or was telling the secretary: "Ask him to call me back". Suddenly, the secretary tells you: "No, no, s/he is on meeting!" They are going to give you an appointment, see you only 5 minutes and not even listen to you"

The contact becomes impossible between the salespeople and his/her customer:

"Yes, in general it is bad sign when [...] the person says : "Ok, I'll call you back" and s/he does not. You don't even have an email, you have nothing. Then it's bad sign. You reply: "S/he is on meeting, s/he can not take the call" or if there is a silence which lasts too long, that means that the customer is gone to the competitors without telling you, that's also clear."

Opposite to complaining, which is an active behavior, neglect can be defined as the absence of reaction.

"The worse customers are not those who complain as we always say. They are those who don't call anymore. Then it is dangerous. When they complain and when we manage to contact them, it doesn't matter. But when they don't call anymore... and some customers have not the honesty to tell us openly [that they are leaving]"

In particular, the absence of reaction is significant when before, the customer-supplier relationship was regular:

"Anyway, when you have a regular business relationship with a customer, from the moment you don't hear his/her voice regularly on the phone anymore, it's bad sign. If the customer doesn't call you anymore, doesn't try to have information [on your services] while s/he was doing so before ... It is disturbing. You have to look for an explanation."

The absence of reaction is considered as a precursor signal of the relationship break-up:

"If you don't hear from them anymore, it's bad sign because in their own they are looking for another solution. And after, you are warned at the last moment that they stopped buying the service and that you have lost them. That's why it is important to have a regular contact, a frequent and regular relationship."

Neglect is positioned as we have supposed, that is between the break-up planning phase and the relationship break-up. Actually, the absence of contact and reaction on behalf of the customer is associated to the fact that the customer is either looking for a better alternative or has already left the relationship:

"When you have him/her regularly on the phone, if s/he feels no more interested in meeting you, that means that s/he has apparently found better somewhere else or that s/he is thinking of going somewhere else."

The second expression of relationship neglect is the decreasing of the consumption without an economic explanation in the customer activity:

“And there are sometimes, when we look at the turnover, if the customer’s purchases are decreasing whereas his/her activity is increasing, we can effectively have some doubts”

In summary, the two main manifestations of the relationship neglect are the absence of contact and the customer consumption decrease:

“But this alarm is first to no more be able to contact them and second, to observe a decrease of the economic exchanges with these customers without cyclical reason”

❑ Information seeking

Information seeking on behalf of the customer as a break-up precursor signal is little evoked by salespeople. The reason might be that it is difficult for the salespeople to perceive that customers are engaged in information seeking about alternatives. Even if information seeking is not clearly expressed, looking for alternatives seems to be associated to the break-up planning:

“I don’t have problems [with customers], I just know people who are thinking about an alternative solution. We are at the reflexion level”.

When it is identified, information seeking is considered as a significant element of a potential departure:

“There are several things.... There is documentation on the desk, when we are in a meeting; there are several little details...”

❑ Objective knowledge about alternatives

Objective knowledge about alternatives represents the number of instances of accurate information about alternatives stored in memory by customers (Capraro, Broniarczyk and Srivastava 2003). It is related to information seeking (we have suggested that to increase his/her level of objective knowledge about alternatives, the customer is engaged beforehand in an information seeking behavior). In the same way, objective knowledge about alternatives is little evoked by the salespeople when talking about customer defection behavior. We might explain this by the fact that, without an active behavior on behalf of the salespeople, it is difficult to assess the level of objective knowledge the customers have about alternatives during the business encounters.

However, some of them seem to consider the objective knowledge about alternatives as important elements:

“We see if it is someone who knows about the market. Some are ignorant of alternatives, but others are very well informed about what is done somewhere else.”

Objective knowledge about alternatives doesn’t seem to be considered by the majority of the informants as a precursor signal of the relationship break-up. However, in our analysis it is the presence and not the frequency of the element that matters. Even if it is little expressed by the salespeople, we consider objective knowledge about alternatives important and relevant as far as it has been expressed.

The first results show that, according to the salespeople, we can say that the relationship break-up is not sudden. Moreover, they clearly bring out some customer behaviors before the relationship break-up. These behaviors are consistent with break-up anticipation and outline the existence of precursor signals.

We present the results concerning the industrial customers' point of view in the next section to compare the results to those related to the salespeople.

The customers' point of view

More than just comparing the point of view of the two partners of the relationship, we examine here the supposed precursor signals of the relationship break-up. We present them according to their importance in the informants' speech.

❑ Complaint behavior

It seems that, before ending the relationship, customers have generally an active behavior by expressing their dissatisfaction, even their intent to leave:

"I told him. I was clear about it. I told him. He knows why we have made business with the competitor, simply because he was not here as it was necessary."

The intent to leave is clearly expressed by the customer to the supplier:

"I don't remember exactly what happened but I have said: "I cannot continue to work in this kind of system » and I went to the competitor."

The analysis sheds light on the role of the complaint behavior: customers complain in a first step to let the supplier react. They give a "second chance" to their supplier:

"At some point, if something goes wrong, we explain it. Then they could react or not, and after we will make our choice according to this."

If the answer to the complaint is judged dissatisfying by the customer, the dissolution process is activated and can end by the decision to break-up the relationship:

"We will explain and after take the decision to leave or not."

According to the supplier's answer, complaint behavior can therefore be considered as a precursor signal of the break-up. The results confirm the role of the complaint behavior in the dissolution process: it stands between the stability stage and the break-up planning phase.

❑ Relationship neglect

First, interviews underline the fact that break-up is not sudden but take place in a progressive way, notably by relationship neglect:

"We had a supplier that, bit by bit, I leave. That's why we are going to buy the service that I asked my [new] salespeople to present me."

Moreover, though the results concerning the salespeople showed that neglect was defined as contact and consumption decreasing, the analysis here brings out only the purchase decrease as the expression of relationship neglect:

“And I have specified that we are going to space out our sending with them. Besides it is amazing how in the first bills, there were two pages billing [...] whereas now there are only three lings.”

“It is what we have done first. At the start we haven’t left all of a sudden, we have made one quarter, three quarters. On quarter the new supplier, three quaters the former.”

Information seeking

We can associate information seeking to relationship break-up. Actually, when they want to break-up the relationship, customers are engaged in an information seeking behavior:

“It’s us! We have taken the necessary steps. I really wanted to leave La Poste. It’s not a competitor who made me change my mind. No, no, it was the contrary!”

Information seeking also involves alternatives comparison:

“First, I asked for other suppliers’ help. Then when I met several of them, they sent me their prices, we have compared, their reliability and what they proposed.”

Objective knowledge about alternatives

Objective knowledge about alternatives really expresses the intention to leave of the customer:

“I keep myself informed. There are competitors who offer this kind of products but I know very well that for the moment they are not interested in doing business with us.”

At the opposite side, knowledge about alternatives can be significant of the non intent to break-up the relationship:

“Except La Poste, I don’t know, it must be admitted that I have never looked for who, except the french post office, can help us in file acquisitions. Maybe there are competitors but I don’t know, we have never looked for.”

The results, from the industrial customers’ point of view show that the relationship break-up is not sudden. Moreover, when talking about how they left their supplier or how they would do so, customers bring out behaviors that are associated with precursor signals of relationship break-up. Actually, the complaint behavior can be, as we had supposed, a precursor signal of the customer departure. In addition, relationship neglect, information seeking, and objective knowledge about alternatives seem to have the hypothesized influence on break-up. They represent means to anticipate and prevent customer leaving.

Finally, comparing the results (salespeople and industrial customers' point of view) we observe that they are, as shown in the table below, almost the same.

		Precursor signals			
The point of view of	Complaint behavior	Information seeking	Objective knowledge about alternatives	Relationship Neglect	
The salespeople	✓	✓	✓	Contact decreasing Customer silence Consumption decreasing	
The industrial customers	✓	✓	✓	Consumption decreasing	

Table 2- Precursor signals of the relationship break-up

We can consider that, regarding relationship break-up, salespeople have a rather good perception of customers behaviors and feelings. The only difference we found is in the expression of the relationship neglect. Whereas salespeople refer to contact decreasing, customer silence and consumption decreasing, customers only talk about consumption decreasing.

Conclusion

In this paper our objective was to outline the existence of relationship break-up precursor signals in the dissolution process and then to identify these signals. To confront this issue we have first reviewed prior research on relationship dissolution process to examine the existence of precursor signals of the break-up. Then, the reviewed research on influencing factors of relationship dissolution has provided elements to identify the precursor signals. We thereby have defined these signals as objective knowledge about alternatives and information seeking associated to, complaint behavior and relationship neglect.

To confront our hypothesis, we conducted an exploratory qualitative analysis. Moreover, regarding the lack of empirical research in the dissolution field, we have chosen to conduct a dyadic analysis to have a better understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, we have interviewed salespeople and their industrial customers in the French mailing sector. The analysis provided some interesting results concerning the precursor signals of the relationship break-up.

First of all, the results show that, as we have supposed, dissolutions are generally not sudden. They evolve among different stages before the break-up decision.

Secondly, the supposed precursor signals are present in the informants' speech. Actually, salespeople and their industrial customers both refer to complaint behavior, information seeking, knowledge about alternatives and relationship neglect when talking about the relationship break-up.

In particular, complaint behavior seems to be stated as we have supposed. On the first hand, it represents a second chance afforded to the supplier. On the other hand, it could correspond to the beginning of the break-up planning stage if the customer is not satisfied with the response of the supplier. Therefore, we can say that it is stated between the stability and the break-up planning stages in the dissolution process.

Concerning information seeking and objective knowledge about alternatives, both salespeople and industrial customers refer to these elements. However, these two elements are not considered by the majority of the salespeople. He have explained this by the fact that, without an active behavior on

behalf of the salespeople, it is difficult to assess if customers are seeking information about alternatives and thereby how much they know about these alternatives.

Finally, the results show that neglect is considered by the salespeople as customer silence, contact and consumption decreasing whereas, when talking about how they have done to leave their former supplier, customers only describe consumption decreasing. This is very interesting and permit to improve the Ping's scale of the relationship neglect. As we have explained before, his scale is too wide and doesn't include all the manifestations that neglect can have.

The first contribution of our paper is to shed light on the possibility of anticipating the relationship break-up. Actually, the literature review and then the empirical study have both pointed out that the relationship break-ups are not sudden. The fact that they are the result of a process which can be long is a first step to argue that one can anticipate the break-up. Besides, the identification in the literature and above all in the qualitative analysis, is another proof of the possible anticipation of the relationship break-up.

Secondly, our research helps to have a better understanding of business relationship break-up. In particular, given the lack of empirical researches in the dissolution field, our paper permits to focus on the anticipation of the relationship break-up which is little studied in marketing literature.

Finally, the results concerning the expression of relationship neglect can help to improve its measurement. The next step is to test if the items which have emerged from the analysis really measure neglect.

This research has also managerial contributions. First, it outlines the fact that firms can be proactive by anticipating the break-up and then try to prevent it. Secondly and more important, our results bring out precursor signals of the relationship break-up. These precursor signals may for example, help managers to detect which customers are in the break-up planning stage.

However, the paper has some limits. First of all, it is a qualitative analysis and the results can not be generalized. Therefore, the main findings have to be quantitatively tested. Secondly, the empirical part is related to a single sector: the french postal sector. It would be necessary to make the same analysis on different sectors.

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