

Changes in perceptions of trust and commitment among marketing researchers and their clients after joining the EU

Vesna Zabkar

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Economics
Kardeljeva ploscad 17
1000 Ljubljana
Slovenia
Email: vesna.zabkar@ef.uni-lj.si

Barbara Zuzel

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Economics

Katja Velepec

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Economics

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Abstract

This paper examines the changes that happened in perceptions of trust and commitment in relationships between research agencies and their clients in two years time due to a change in factors in firms' external environment, specifically due to recent EU membership. The basic premise is that changes in the external business environment have increased the level of competitiveness in the market and influenced client's need for market related information provided by research companies, and also their trust and commitment to the research firm. The study is based on two surveys, from 2003 and 2005. The results indicate that in the two-year period the intentions of continuing the relationships intensified and the importance of the relationship between partners increased. With changes in the external environment and increased competition in the market, clients' trust and commitment to the research firm increased.

Introduction

Trust is one of the most important behavioural factors that influence the use of marketing research because it decreases the perceived uncertainty and vulnerability connected to the use of marketing information (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992). Researchers have studied trust in various organisational and social settings and have also conceptualized it in different ways.

Trust is often cited as the main factor of successful development of business relationships (Naudé and Buttle 2000). Spekman (1988) describes it as the building block of strategic partnership. Trust provides the main foundation for the socio-political aspects of the business relationship and it is seen as a primary component of relationships in business-to-business markets (Goodman and Dion 2001).

Wilson (1995) points out that a belief one relationship partner will act in the best interest of the other is present in most definitions of trust. Two of the most widely cited definitions of trust in marketing literature are those by Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992) and Morgan and Hunt (1994). Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992, p. 315) define trust as “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence.” Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) build on the presented definition and define trust as “existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity”.

According to Doney and Cannon (1997, p. 36) who examined the nature of trust in buyer-seller relationships trust is “the perceived credibility and benevolence of a target of trust”. This is similar to Anderson and Narus (1990) who define trust as the belief that the other side will act in the best interests of the firm and that it will not engage in unexpected actions that will have negative consequences for the partner. In the service context Garbarino and Johnson (1999, p. 73) defined trust as customer’s certainty of quality and reliability of services offered by an organization.

In our research we adopt the definition proposed by Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992) who studied trust in relationships between marketing research firms and their clients. An important aspect of their definition is the concept of trust as the belief, feeling or expectation whether the partner is trustworthy that is derived from partner’s knowledge, reliability or intentions. Gutierrez, Cillan and Izquierdo (2004) similarly distinguish between two dimensions of trust: perceived capacity and capabilities on the one hand and perceived values and intentions on the other.

Commitment is one of the most frequently used variables in studies of buyer – seller relationships. It indicates the importance of the relationship between partners and their intention to continue the relationship into the future (Wilson 1995). Among the most widely accepted definitions of commitment in the context of business relationships are definitions of Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) and Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992). Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987, p. 19) define commitment as “implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity between exchange partners”, while Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992, p. 316) define it as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship”.

The definition by Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992) includes three elements that frequently appear in the literature of relationships in business-to-business markets (Tellefsen and Thomas 2005). First, commitment is enduring. Second, it reflects willingness and it is based on a personal choice rather than legal obligation. While committed partners can be connected with short-term legal contracts, it is their choice to continue relationship when current legal obligations have been fulfilled (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Macneil 1980). And third, commitment is driven by value. Companies will enter a long-term relationship only if they believe they can get some special value out of it (Tellefsen and Thomas 2005).

Commitment therefore develops though time and it entails willingness of both sides to make short-term sacrifices in order to attain long-term benefits (Anderson and Weitz 1992). It can function as a psychological bond that binds partners when they face frustration or problems. If partners are not committed, they will solve problems with searching for new partners. But if they are committed, they will be motivated to maintain the relationship and to find a solution (Day 1995; Dwyer, Shurr, and Oh 1987; Macneil 1980; in Tellefsen and Thomas 2005). Commitment is always to some extent an “act of faith” by which the actors deal with uncertainty and the complexities of situations. It is a result of actions and counteractions and it only makes sense to talk about commitment if future is important (Håkansson and Snehota 1995).

Some IMP researches (Ritter and Gemünden 2003) classify commitment under relationship atmosphere components, while Kumar, Scheer and Steenkamp (1995) define it as one of the five dimensions of relationship quality. In general, commitment is besides trust and satisfaction frequently defined as one of the three key components of relationship quality, especially at consumer markets (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002).

Sharma, Young and Wilkinson (2001) maintain there are two main ways in which commitment has been conceptualized in the literature – as an attitude and as behaviour. The majority of proposed relationship models studied the attitudinal component of commitment and operationalized it as a global construct. However, some researchers (Berghäll 2003; Brown, Lusch, and Nicholson 1995; Geyskens et al. 1996; Gilliland and Bello 2002; Gounaris 2005; Kim and Frazier 1997; de Ruyter and Wetzels 1999; Wetzels, de Ruyter, and van Birgelen 1998) studied attitudinal commitment as consisting of two (calculative and affective) and some (Kumar, Hibbard, and Stern 1994; Kelly 2004; de Ruyter and Semeijn 2002) of three components: *calculative* (“attachment due to instrumental reasons”), *affective* (“attachment due to liking and identification”) and *moral* or *normative* (“attachment due to felt obligations”).

All these types of commitment pertain to psychological states, but they originate from different motivations for maintaining a relationship (Geyskens et al. 1996). An *affectively committed* partner wants to stay in the relationship because it likes the partner, enjoys the partnership and it feels a sense of loyalty and belongingness. *Normatively committed* partner stays in the relationships because it feels it needs to. On the other hand, *calculative commitment* is “the extent to which partners perceive the need to maintain a relationship given the significant anticipated termination or switching costs”. It results from a ‘cold’ calculation of costs and benefits, including an assessment of the investments made in the relationship and the availability of alternatives to replace or make up for the foregone investments (Allen and Meyer 1990; in Geyskens et al. 1996, p. 304-305). Calculative commitment is therefore based in the perceived structural constraints that tie the firm to its partners and it reflects a somewhat negative motivation for staying in a relationship.

Theory of commitment gives applicable explanation of how partners strive to keep relationships: the continuity of a relationship is the essence of the concept of commitment (Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer 1995). Committed companies show fewer alternations in suppliers and less intention to leave relationships than non-committed companies (Kumar, Hibbard, and Stern 1994; Mathieu and Zajac 1990). Committed companies will also perform activities with the purpose to organize and keep existing relationships (Becker 1960).

Positive impact of trust on commitment was discovered in several empirical studies (Goodman, Dion 2001; Lohtia et al. 2005; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992; Morgan, Hunt 1994; Perry, Covaye, and Coote 2002; Rodriguez and Wilson 2002; Tellefsen and Thomas 2005). Trust leads involved partners to concentrate more on “positive” motivation and feeling of connectedness and identification with each other and less on calculative reasons of attachment to supplier (de Ruyter, Moorman, and Lemmink 2001). When trust is low, one side will more likely carefully examine and supervise behaviour of the other. Decisions to keep relationships will be more likely based on direct calculations of benefits relative to costs (Geyskens et al. 1996). With growing trust there are fewer reasons to keep relationship based on calculative commitment (de Ruyter, Moorman, and Lemmink 2001). With lack of trust it is unlikely that partners would be emotionally committed (Geyskens et al. 1996).

Geyskens, Steenkamp and Kumar (1999) point out that the relationship between trust and commitment has been over researched and that results are almost unanimous. However, relatively little attention has been paid to this relationship in contexts outside the Western hemisphere countries. The purpose of this paper is to present the research about trust and commitment among clients of marketing research firms in an emerging country of Slovenia.

The paper examines the changes that happened in perceptions of trust and commitment in two years time, in 2003 and in 2005, due to a change in factors in firms’ external environment, specifically due to recent EU membership. Since May 2004, pressures of competition have been forcing companies into adaptation to new requirements, into restructuring and concentration. With competition getting stronger, the negative consequences affected companies that are smaller than their European rivals

and industries that have been relying heavily on their domestic market. Companies became less competitive in terms of economies of scale, because of their poor operating results and small added value.

The basic premise is that changes in the external business environment have increased the level of competitiveness in the market and influenced client's need for market related information provided by research companies, and also their trust and commitment to the research firm. We test the following hypotheses for relationships between marketing research firms and their clients:

H1: With changes in the external environment that increased needs for research services, clients' trust into the research firm increased.

H2: With changes in the external environment that increased needs for research services, the correlation between clients' trust and commitment to the research firm increased.

Research method

The target population for the survey are Slovenian firms, marketing research clients. The study is based on two surveys, from 2003 and 2005.

The data in both years was gathered from managers responsible for marketing research in each of the firms. The respondents were evaluating their relationship with the agency that carried out their most recent research project in order to get variability in business relationships included in the survey. We used judgmental sample of marketing research users because it enabled us to test their attitude towards the use of marketing research and to determine the factors that influence establishment of trust among clients and researchers.

The sample from 2003 included 100 firms (web-based survey). Sample frame included companies that were listed on the websites of the important marketing research firms in Slovenia and those similar to them by size and industry. An e-mail invitation was sent to 400 companies. Names of contact persons were acquired through telephone contact with the company. A week after the first mailing we contacted the companies that have not responded. In two months 100 companies returned questionnaires, therefore the overall response rate was 25 %.

Two years later, after the country joined EU (in May 2004), the same sample frame was used as in 2003 survey, expanded with additional 100 companies that were not listed as research firms' clients in 2003. E-mail with invitation was sent to 500 addresses. Out of those 230 ordered at least one survey from a marketing-research agency in the two previous years. Data collection started in March and by the end of July 150 telephone interviews were completed, therefore response rate was 65.2 % (Churchill and Iacobucci 2005).

Respondents were instructed to answer questions about the specific relationship, keeping in mind not only the last research but the entire relationship they had had with that provider. Respondents were asked to express their agreement with a given statement, using a seven-point Likert-type scale (from 1 – completely disagree, to 7 – completely agree). Both questionnaires also included questions about the size of the company, industry in which the company operates, duration of the relationship, number of years respondent spent working with this provider etc.

Our measurement instrument for measuring trust in 2003 study is based on Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992). Research conducted in 2005 was broader and it included additional variables of trust based on Doney and Cannon (1997) and Gounaris and Venetis (2002). Operationalization of commitment in 2003 research was based on Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992), while in 2005 on Kumar, Hibbard and Stern (1994). In 2005 study the focus was on commitment, therefore it was measured with three components (affective, calculative and normative). Measuring scales used for measuring the above mentioned constructs were the following:

User trust in researcher (2003):

- *If I or someone from my department could not be reached by our researcher, I would be willing to let my researcher make important research decisions without my involvement.*

- *If I or someone from my department were unable to monitor my researcher's activities, I would be willing to trust my researcher to get the job done right.*
- *I trust my researcher to do things I can't do myself.*
- *I trust my researcher to do things my department can't do itself.*
- *I generally trust my researcher (*modified).*

Commitment to relationship (2003):

- *I am committed to my relationship with my researcher.*
- *I consider my researcher to be a part of my department.*

User trust (2005) – scale from 2003 with additional items:

- *I cannot trust the agency that it will carry out the research correctly (R).*
- *I can trust that the agency will keep our data confidential.*
- *I can trust that the agency will plan the research with expertise.*
- *This agency is not always honest with us (R).*
- *We believe in information that this agency provides us.*
- *This agency keeps promises it makes to our firm.*
- *We trust this agency keeps our best interests in mind.*

Commitment to relationship (2005):

Affective commitment:

- *It is pleasant to work with this provider; that's why we continue to do business with them.*
- *We want to remain a client of this agency because we genuinely enjoy our relationship with the agency.*
- *Our decision to remain a client of this company is based on our attraction to the things the agency stands for as a company.*
- *We like working with the agency, and want to remain their client.*

Calculative commitment:

- *It is too difficult to switch to another research agency because of the lack of good alternatives; therefore we stay with this agency, otherwise we'd consider leaving.*
- *Right now, staying with the agency is a matter of necessity, since no feasible alternatives exist.*
- *There is too much time, energy and expense involved in switching to another agency that is why we stay with this agency (dropped).*
- *It would be hard for us to transfer the investments we have made in support of this agency, so we continue to work with them (dropped).*

Normative commitment:

- *Even if we received a better offer from another research agency we believe it is not right to drop this agency.*
- *We feel a sense of duty to remain a client of this agency.*
- *The employees who work with this provider would feel guilty if we dropped this agency.*
- *Even if it were beneficial to our company it would be dishonourable to change the agency.*

Scale items were in both cases summated after we had run exploratory factor analysis and tested reliability with Cronbach α coefficient. Certain items had to be dropped (noted above) in order to ensure reliability and validity of our research instruments.

Research findings

First we had to establish that the two samples had similar characteristics so that we could compare results from both studies. We compared respondents by company size and industry. In 2003 35% of respondents had up to 50 employees, while in 2005 there were 40.7% of such companies. Companies with 51-100 employees were present to a lesser extent (9% in 2003 and 13.3% in 2005), while there were over 20% of companies with 101-500 employees (22% in 2003 and 24.7% in 2005). Some differences existed with large companies (over 501 employees); there were 32% of those in the 2003 research and 21.3% in 2005. When comparing companies by industry, the majority in both years were companies that provide business services (27% in 2003 and 24.7% in 2005), followed by manufacturing (26% in 2003 and 23.3% in 2005), trade (16% in 2003 and 22% in 2005), services for

consumers (13% in 2003 and 12.7% in 2005) and services for both companies and consumers (12% in 2003 and 11.3% in 2005) and other industries (6% of sample in both years). In 2005, 85% of companies responded that their relationship with research agency was two years or more. Differences between the two samples are due also to changes in the structure of research firms' clients in the two-year period with new addition clients expressing needs for research services. We can conclude that samples do not match perfectly however reflect the structure of research firms' clients in both years and therefore enable us to compare certain findings.

According to the findings of the research in year 2003, Slovenian clients on average trust external researchers. In most cases they are willing to let their researchers make important research decisions without their involvement. The clients trust their researchers also in the cases when they are unable to monitor their activities and expect that the researcher's job will be done right. The clients usually decide for cooperation with external researchers when they or their department cannot do some of the research activities by themselves. The clients trust researcher's knowledge and abilities to fulfil their liabilities and contribute to the solution of research problems.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for client's trust in researcher in 2003

	Mean	Std. deviation
I generally trust my researcher.	6.10	1.45
I trust my researcher to do things my department can't do itself.	5.66	1.48
I trust my researcher to do things I can't do myself.	5.64	1.43
If I or someone from my department were unable to monitor my researcher's activities, I would be willing to trust my researcher to get the job done right.	5.51	1.31
If I or someone from my department could not be reached by our researcher, I would be willing to let my researcher make important research decisions without my involvement.	5.30	1.47

Scale: 1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree, n = 100.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for client's commitment to relationship with researcher in 2003

	Mean	Std. deviation
I am committed to my relationship with my researcher.	3.56	1.65
I consider my researcher to be a part of my department.	3.59	1.80

Scale: 1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree, n = 100.

The research about the extent of client's commitment to relationship with researcher in year 2003 showed that clients are on average not committed to external researchers and are not connected to them in such a way they would consider researchers as a part of their department or company. The clients mainly do not care about the future of their working relationship with their researchers, which could be contributed to a short-term relationship with researchers. The commitment can be established by partnership among parties in relationships and at realization of more common research projects.

The correlation coefficient between client's trust in researcher and commitment to relationship with researcher in 2003 showed that the association between these two variables was positive and statistically significant, however not very strong (0,202*). The conclusion is made on the basis of correlation between subject's aggregated attitude scores for each construct.

In the research that took place two years later, in year 2005, we measured trust in the research agency as clients' perception of research agencies' reliability and benevolence. On average respondents indicated the highest level of agreement with the statements that they can trust that the agency will carry out the research correctly and that it will treat their data confidentially. The lowest level of agreement was indicated with the statements that they would trust their agency to get the job

done right without supervision, that the agency is benevolent (keeps in mind best interests of clients) and that they would let the researcher make important decisions without their involvement. We can see that clients have on average indicated higher agreement with statements regarding trust in the agency's research competencies and reliability and lower agreement with statements related to benevolence of research agency and relying on research agency to work without their supervision and involvement. Results are also in line with results of the 2003 research.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for client's trust in researcher in 2005

	Mean	Std. deviation
I cannot trust the agency that it will carry out the research correctly (R).	6.35	0.93
I can trust that the agency will keep our data confidential.	6.32	0.88
I can trust that the agency will plan the research with expertise.	6.05	1.03
This agency is not always honest with us (R).	5.93	1.39
We believe in information that this agency provides us.	5.85	1.03
<i>I trust my researcher to do things I can't do myself.</i>	<i>5.76</i>	<i>1.60</i>
<i>I trust my researcher to do things my department can't do itself.</i>	<i>5.74</i>	<i>1.59</i>
This agency keeps promises it makes to our firm.	5.72	1.25
<i>If I or someone from my department were unable to monitor my researcher's activities, I would be willing to trust my researcher to get the job done right.</i>	<i>5.61</i>	<i>1.24</i>
We trust this agency keeps our best interests in mind.	5.59	1.18
<i>If I or someone from my department could not be reached by our researcher, I would be willing to let my researcher make important research decisions without my involvement.</i>	<i>5.57</i>	<i>1.28</i>

Scale: 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree, n = 150.

Looking at three components of commitment we can see that clients are on average mostly affectively committed which is similar to the global measure of commitment (used in the first research). Respondents have indicated the highest level of agreement with the statement that they continue relationship with the agency because it is pleasant to work with them. They also stay in the relationship because they enjoy the relationship with the provider, are attracted to the things the agency stands for as a company and like working with the agency. So they are motivated to continue the relationship due to liking and identification. Statements measuring calculative and normative commitment were on average rated between "disagree" and "partially disagree". The lowest level of agreement was indicated with the statement that it would not be honourable to change the agency even if that was beneficial to the client. There was high variability in all variables measuring commitment. Clients therefore on average do not continue examined relationship due to lack of alternatives and felt obligations.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for client's commitment to researcher in 2005

	Mean	Std. deviation
It is pleasant to work with this provider; that's why we continue to do business with them.	5.52	1.32
We want to remain a client of this agency because we genuinely enjoy our relationship with the agency.	4.83	1.56
Our decision to remain a client of this company is based on our attraction to the things the agency stands for as a company.	4.77	1.54
We like working with the agency, and want to remain their client.	4.63	1.58

It is too difficult to switch to another research agency because of the lack of good alternatives; therefore we stay with this agency, otherwise we'd consider leaving.	3.02	1.93
Even if we received a better offer from another research agency we believe it is not right to drop this agency.	2.69	1.60
We feel a sense of duty to remain a client of this agency.	2.34	1.51
Right now, staying with the agency is a matter of necessity, since no feasible alternatives exist.	2.31	1.93
The employees who work with this provider would feel guilty if we dropped this agency.	2.28	1.54
Even if it were beneficial to our company it would be dishonourable to change the agency.	1.79	1.17

Scale: 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree, n = 150.

For 2005 data we tested relationships between components of commitment and trust. Analysis revealed moderate correlation between trust and affective commitment (0.608**) that is in line with findings of Anderson and Weitz (1989), de Ruyter and Wetzels (1999), de Ruyter, Moorman and Lemmink (2001), Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Geyskens et al. (1996). Statistically significant but low correlation was also found between trust and calculative commitment (-0.310**) that supports findings of Geyskens et al. (1996), de Ruyter and Wetzels (1999) and de Ruyter, Moorman and Lemmink (2001). No significant correlation was found between trust and normative commitment.

To sum up: the research in 2003 (one year before the joining of the country to the EU) showed that Slovenian firms on average trust their research agencies. They were in most cases eager to leave important decisions regarding the research to the research agency. They trusted researchers also when it was not possible to follow their work and expected that the work would be carried out well. Clients trusted the knowledge and abilities of researchers to fulfil their obligations and contribute to the solution of their research problem. According to 2003 findings, clients were on average not committed to external research agencies and were not connected to them in a way to consider them part of their company. Also, the future of their cooperation with researchers was not an issue, probably due to short-term relationships with the researchers. The correlation between trust and commitment was low, revealing a positive but weak relationship between the two constructs.

In 2005 (one year after joining the EU) the respondents on average mostly agreed with the statement that they trusted agency to carry out the research in a proper manner and to treat their data with confidentiality. Results were to a high degree in line with results from 2003 although the mean values were on average higher. The research in 2005 showed statistically significant differences among clients that have business relationships with their agencies for five years or more: on average they trusted agency important research decisions to a higher degree, were less cautious in the relationship and thought that the agency cared about their success in comparison to firms with business relationships of less than one year duration. Respondents in 2005 on average mostly agreed with the statement that it was pleasant to cooperate with the agency, together with other measures of emotional commitment. Respondents mostly disagreed with statements that related to calculative and normative commitment. They disagreed that it would not be honourable for to them to switch agency. For all measured variables of commitment there was a high degree of variability in answers among respondents.

Conclusion

The main contribution of the research lies in the context of research: it is carried out on business relationships between marketing research agencies and their clients in the new EU member country. The basic assumption behind the research is that this change in the external environment increased the competitive intensity in the market. The competition is getting stronger with the EU entry and the negative consequences of this affect companies and industries that have been heavily relying on the domestic market. Sectors that have witnessed much change and have had to cope with considerable difficulties after the EU entry are textile, farming, and food processing industries (<http://www.uvi.si>). One quarter of our sample in 2003 and 2005 were manufacturing companies, including textile and food processing industries.

Our hypothesis with regard to increased competition in the market was that under circumstances the client's trust and commitment to the research firm should increase. Strong business relationship with researcher could be a value added for a company. In the new business conditions in the domestic and the EU internal market, companies with business relationships with researcher that they can trust and feel committed to should be in an advantageous position.

We compared findings from the two time periods: before and after joining the EU that should mean a significant change in the external environment for firms. In 2003, Slovenian clients on average trusted external researchers, however, were not strongly committed. Before joining EU results actually showed tendency for short-term business relationships with research companies. Correlation between trust and commitment was positive however not strong. Two years later, trust to researchers was high, highest for clients with longer period of working with specific agency. What is especially interesting is that perceptions of client's affective commitment to their agencies is higher than before, highest for clients that have been in the relationship with researcher for the period of 2-4 years. Correlation between trust and affective commitment was positive and strong. The results indicate that two years later the intentions of continuing the relationships among research firms' clients' intensified and the importance of the relationship between partners increased. It seems that with changes in the external environment and increased competition in the market, clients' trust and commitment to the research firm indeed increased.

This study has several limitations that can be attributed mostly to differences in research design of the two studies. We are dealing with two cross-sectional studies in two-year period, which accounted for changes in the research firms' clients' structure and perceptions. Longitudinal study of changes in perceptions of identified firms in the two-year period could give us less robust comparisons before and after the major change in external business environment. Also, contact method used in the two surveys contributed to differences in response rate. Finally, measurement scales were developed and expanded with more focus on commitment, which contributes to more extensive presentation of clients' perceptions of trust and commitment for 2005. Nevertheless, the perceptions of the research firm's about trust and commitment in their business relationships with their clients were not included in this survey.

However, little research exists so far in the area of business relationships outside the Western hemisphere countries. The changes in external environment with stronger competition and increased need for market related information seem to be an interesting research subject in the context of business relationships among research firms and their clients. Increased number of research firms' clients in the market in the two-year period is an important indicator for our research, further supported by high levels of trust, affective commitment and correlation between the two in the more recent of the two surveys. Research firms can use these results to maintain their business relationships with their clients. They should support market activities of their clients through providing them with relevant information and educating new clients. Trust and commitment from their clients call for willingness to make short-term sacrifices in order to gain long-term benefits.

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