

COMPETITIVE PAPER

MEASUREMENT OF CUSTOMER LOYALTY AS AN ELEMENT OF BUILDING B2B RELATIONSHIPS – PERSPECTIVE OF FIELD RESEARCH REALIZED IN POLAND

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B2B RELATIONSHIPS AS THE OBJECT OF MARKETING RESEARCH

For a long time marketing scholars have been formulating suggestions that concern building trade relations between salesmen and buyers. Changing market environment, however, contributes to the fact that these relations are perceived in a more and more complex way. Moreover, new methods of analysing such relations are continually being explored. In western countries already in the seventies it was noticed that bargaining power of institutional customers had clearly grown up. Such a situation requires from marketing specialists using more interactive and individualized instruments transcending the traditional 4P model. The interest in immaterial and long-term aspects of contacts between firms (Business to Business - B2B) is connected with the development of the so-called relationship marketing (RM) paradigm in this area. Relationship marketing postulates raising by firms multidimensional (transcending sale data) institutional knowledge base about customers. The market information system has to serve to arrange customers in accordance with their long-term value for the firm. On this basis there follows rational allocation of the marketing budget because most of all resources is allocated on tightening the cooperation (eg. by the individualisation of the offer) with particular customers treated as potential long-term partners.

In the eighties the results of crucial studies concerning the nature of exchange between companies were published. Authors of these studies - West-European research workers – were organized into an irregular group called IMP - International Marketing and Purchasing Group.

The indications from IMP research suggest that in many industrial settings B2B relationships are a key mechanism of efficiency. Such relationships are important for any single company and for its counterparts. The transaction cost theory gives relationships a hard core of economics: relationships can be a way of reaching a higher level of efficiency than in the situation of a “pure” market mechanism. These ideas are consistent with various findings on positive economic effects of quasi-integration arrangements described by such concepts as just-in-time inventory management, time based management, and total quality control (Håkansson, Snehota, 2000).

Representatives of IMP group noticed that developing close or co-operative B2B relationships is not always the best managerial solution. It may well be in company’s best interests to keep its distance when dealing with some counterparts. Nevertheless, whether they are close, distant, co-operative, conflictful, predictable or wildly fluctuating, relationships between companies exist. “Relationship” is not a dichotomous variable and a company cannot choose to have or not to have one with particular customer or supplier. Instead, the issue is what the nature of that relationship will be. When these relationships are good, they are major assets, when they are bad, they are liabilities, but whatever they are, they have to be managed (Ford, 1997).

Most of IMP researchers accepted that research on status and conditions of commercial B2B relationships cannot be limited to dyads. More and more often they conducted studies of entire networks among subjects on industrial market. Such networks consist of the direct relationships that the company has with its suppliers and customers as well as with other organization such as

financial institutions and research houses. The network also consists of the relationships that these counterpart companies have with other suppliers or customers. Many scholars arrived at the conclusion that in most cases a company cannot design or control the wider network that surrounds it (Ford, 1997).

Despite that the range of interest and methodological attitude of research workers from IMP group has extended over time, it still seems justifiable to conduct such research projects which bear upon problems of building permanent relationships with customers with regard to various cultural regions or sectors with different level of the intensity of the competition. The most of the research driven within the IMP group refers to Western countries the economies of which are strongly developed. Therefore it is proper to consider a stage of the development of the practice and the theory of the marketing in other countries, eg. Poland as a representative of Central Europe.

SPREADING MARKETING AMONG SCHOLARS AND PRACTITIONERS OF B2B MARKET IN POLAND

In Poland 18 years have already passed from the beginning of the process of economic transformation: from centrally planned economy to the market economy. In this period the popularity of the marketing as the conception of acting of firms on B2B market has been systematically growing. At present, however, most Polish companies do not fully use marketing orientation. The most popular one seems the practice of utilization of different promotion tools, for the purpose of the quick enlargement of sales. Companies' offers are often constructed out of restricted knowledge about customers and competitors. Generally, it results in the limitation of the meaning of marketing department to executive functions. Annual marketing schedules are seldom formulated even in large companies operating on B2B market. From the interviews conducted among presidents of greatest companies, however, we may conclude that the enlargement of customer loyalty is treated as a crucial managerial problem in Poland. Already in the year 2003, enlarging the customer loyalty was treated as the prior challenge in comparison to other aims, such as: the cost reduction and the identification of workers with the vision of the firm (Zdziarski, Obłój, 2003). Some Polish companies use customer databases and CRM computer systems which facilitate market segmentation and communication with customers. More and more popular are promotional schemes which provide customers with various awards in exchange for the continuation of shopping. Firms cannot, however, cope with evaluation of effectiveness of projects fastened upon improving customer relationships. Such projects are often initiated under competition pressure or fashion promoted by the business press, they are, however, hardly ever properly planned.

Growing interest in building B2B relationships in Poland was also remarkably influenced by publications of some theoreticians (Rogoziński 1998; Otto, 2001; Mitreğa 2005). Empirical studies conducted within the framework of ACE international projects financed by the European Union (Fonfara, 1999) are of crucial importance for the popularisation of relationship perspective in scientific projects referring to B2B exchange in Poland.

Even if among Polish scholars the possibility of using of relationship marketing strategy with reference to industrial market already gained many advocates, one can continually notice the lack of empirical research which would verify particular methods and rules of this strategy with reference to business practice. This situation induced the group of scholars of Market and Marketing Research Department at the Karol Adamiecki University of Economics (Katowice, Poland) to conduct relevant research project.

MEASUREMENT OF CUSTOMER LOYALTY ON B2B MARKET

There is no consensus in the marketing literature on how loyalty should be measured. This lack of agreement has been seen in many papers promoting a single approach over another one. This debate has encouraged other researchers to join the fray with their own view on this issue. Loyalty research in B2B context is relatively new, therefore it is reasonable to modify consumer measures to conduct empirical study about consumer loyalty in this domain sphere (Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, 2002, 2004; Taylor *et al*, 2004; Foster, Cadogan, 2000).

According to Uncles *et al* (2003) there are observed generally three conceptualisations of customer loyalty phenomenon:

- Attitudinal loyalty - an attitude that sometimes leads to a relationship with the brand;
- Behavioural loyalty - mainly expressed in terms of revealed behaviour (eg. the pattern of past purchase);
- Co-determinants of buying brand - especially the individual's characteristics, circumstances, and/or the purchase situation.

The loyalty of the customer is usually expressed in specific customer behaviours towards the provider of products or services (behavioural loyalty). Customer loyalty relies, however, not only on continuing buying goods of the same brand, but it also contains the avoidance of buying other brands. The loyal business customer concentrates his own expenses on products of the given type (eg. leasing services or metallurgic products) within contacts with one preferred supplier. Such situation is close to monogamous relationship and is usually connected with attitudinal loyalty. Many authors argue that there must be strong "attitudinal commitment" for true buyer-seller relationship to exist (Barnes, 2003; Jones, Sasser, 1995; Uncles *et al*, 2003; Reichheld, 1996). It is necessary to notice that motives of staying of the customer in the monogamous relationship with seller can be diverse (Bendapudi, Berry, 1997). Except the case of special "attitudinal commitment", the customer can take advantage of cooperation with one firm due to the temporary formal contract of the exclusiveness. Such contracts are often observed among companies cooperating in distribution channels. The reason can also be the lack of alternatives, that is to say, circumstances approximate to the monopoly. In many European countries, especially in the sphere of the public utility, the market supremacy of one entity is evident. Formal contracts and monopoly market situation can be treated as examples of third customer loyalty conceptualisation.

While loyal market behaviours of customer like a frequent and expensive purchases are priceless for managers, without knowledge and understanding of the attitude towards the act of buying the brand, it is difficult to design marketing programmes to modify behavioural loyalty. This is particularly the case in non-stable environment. Measuring attitudinal brand loyalty can identify customers who are vulnerable in a changing environment (Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, 2002).

On the one hand, in managing customer relationships it is well founded to use various manners of the measurement of attitudinal customer loyalty. Such complex approach enlarges the reliability of the measurement. It has also this advantage that these increases elasticity of the whole system of marketing information. On the other hand, not always can a marketer ask customer for certain matters directly, this is why he should choose wisely from accessible set of loyalty measures. It seems also obvious that in practice of buyer -seller contacts there is usually not enough time to use long mail questionnaires measuring customer loyalty. As a result, it is a utilitarian need to find an easy and fast manner of brand loyalty measurement. According to Reichheld (2004), one can treat customer inclination to recommend brand as such a universal

measure. It appeared that by means of customer answer to one question about brand recommendations, the manager can say a lot about perspectives of growth of the brand. Over two years there was conducted an analysis of relations between answers on questionnaires and real behaviours of customers (the course and the range of purchasing towards recommending the firm among familiar). In the most investigated sectors the percentage of customers who were so much satisfied that they intended to instruct their own familiar to use particular brand, was directly tied to the dynamics of the company growth.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION-LOYALTY LINK

The most frequently mentioned outcome of the marketing process is satisfied customer, with many definitions of marketing incorporating this important marketing concept (Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, 2004). There is statistical evidence for a positive non-linear relationship, and this is verified through high correlations, betas and r^2 . Three key issues emerged from the literature regarding the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, 2004):

- satisfaction and loyalty are related constructs;
- there are moderating factors for the relationship;
- the methodology influences the outcome of the research.

The shape (the proportionality) of the relationship between the satisfaction and the loyalty is differentiated in particular business sectors (Bolton, 1998; Gronholdt, *et al* 2000; Homburg, Giering, 2001). The illustration of this argument are comparative studies coordinated by Jones and Sasser (1995) and extended by Lee, Lee and Feick (2001). It was found that satisfaction-loyalty link could range from almost linear relationship in mobile telephony to logarithmic relationship in case of fixed-line telephony and almost exponential (with positive exponential base) relationship in case of passenger cars.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In 2006 the author of this paper invited to the participation in research project suppliers on business to business market in Poland. These firms were interested mainly in identification of current status and development of their key customer relationships. Simultaneously, the research (including questionnaire) was designed in order to solve research problems on the basis of population of business customers dealing with involved companies. A superior aim of the project was the identification of major instruments of increasing and efficient methods of measurement of customer loyalty on B2B market in Poland. The research team obtained formal references from enterprises - partners of the project. These firms expressed in this way satisfaction connected with the possibility of exploiting the obtained results in their own activities.

Research project was realized in accordance with the methodology of interactive research (Gummesson, 2001), consulting every stage with managers of 10 involved firms. Finally, research workers discussed major findings during conference specially organized for business practitioners. The overall research results were presented in the book (Mitreğa, 2007) and some selected parts (including more descriptive results and case studies) in other articles (Mitreğa, 2006, 2007). Focus of this paper is on research results connected with customer satisfaction-loyalty link and utilization of customer recommendation as synthetic measure of loyalty of business customer.

The research had to some extent both quantitative and qualitative character. A main technique of information gathering was interview. Interviews were carried out in 2006 by the team of research workers among representatives of business customers which maintained

business contacts with companies partnering in the project. Furthermore, scholars used the case study technique based on internal data made available by business partners of the project.

Thanks to the research agreement with B2B providers, members of the research team obtained some preliminary information on real behaviours of buyers. This information was originated from transaction records aggregated by B2B providers (eg. information about participation of particular customers in firm turnovers, length of the cycle of the cooperation with given customers and frequency of transactions). Unfortunately, this data appeared to be incomplete and aggregated in various manners, so it was incomparable. Therefore it was accepted that perspectives of the development of B2B relationships will be identified, first of all, on the basis of statements formulated under face to face interviews.

Selected sectors of the B2B market including electromechanical sector, energy sector, financial services, telecommunications services, infrastructural services, consulting services, hotel industry and construction services were subject to research. Intentional selection aimed at creating a set of sectors that were strongly diversified with regard to frequency of company-customer contacts and customers' freedom within the choice of a service provider (the most frequently connected with a level of sector concentration). Finally, ten B2B suppliers participated in the academic research. Each of these firms pointed 20 key customers. The major criterion of selection of particular customers was their percentage share in overall suppliers' sales. Thanks to utilization of face to face interview method and strong support of commercial partners, very high response rate was reached. Finally, the research population consisted of 189 market entities. It is necessary to mention that in the research participated both firms which stuck out for customers with many competitors (the subgroup: the free competition) as such which operated in conditions of the oligopoly or the monopoly. The highest concentration of the market appeared in case of suppliers of the earth gas and the coal.

According to presented in this article part of the research, hypotheses were derived as follows:

H 1: The loyalty of business customers is strongly related to satisfaction of business customers;

H 2: The highest level of competition on the market, the stronger relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty

H 3: Customer inclination to recommend brand is effective measure of customer loyalty

The measures used in the questionnaire were combined from sources referring to both B2C and B2B research as well (Barnes, 1997; Foster, Cadogan, 2000). Consumer satisfaction and loyalty were measured on multi-item 5-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 = *definitely not* to 5 = *definitely yes*. Research questionnaire used in the project always referred to the same set of research problems, there were, however, implemented some modifications of questions according to characteristics of products being offered by ten companies partnering in the research. As an example, all three major questions used among customers of provider of fiber-optic cables are presented in table 1. Also one question with ratio scale was included to identify current level of customer loyalty (Malhotra, 2004). During interview questions were always directed at concrete, named company - provider of a given type of products or services. Therefore, one can conclude that it was measured rather the attitude towards the act of durable purchasing a specific brand than propensity to be brand loyal in general (Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, 2002).

Table 1. Questions used in interview according to consumer satisfaction and loyalty - case of sector of fiber-optic cables providers

Please, specify the likelihood of further cooperation with company... Consider following issues:

Specification	Definitely not	Rather not	Cannot say	Rather yes	Definitely yes
<i>If I am asked about the provider of fiber-optic cables by familiar company, I will recommend them company ...</i>					
<i>In few years time I will still buy fiber-optic cables from company ...</i>					
<i>Existing cooperation with company ... fulfills my expectations</i>					

Please, try to estimate how many (in%) fiber-optic cables which you order currently are these delivered by company... in comparison to other fiber-optic cables providers%

According to the conceptualisations of customer loyalty discussed in previous paragraphs of the paper it was assumed that the most evident indication of the customer loyalty (especially attitudinal, but also something like behavioural) is the purchasing concentration. It seems reasonable that such meaning of loyalty incorporates well the strength or the depth of customer relationships because it refers to monogamy situation (Barnes, 1997). This is why in the next paragraph of the paper statistical relationships between existing and future (potential) purchasing concentration and customer satisfaction and recommendations will be presented.

CUSTOMER LOYALTY RESEARCH RESULTS

During interviews representatives of business customers answered questions diagnosing present level and perspectives of their loyalty towards particular sellers. The main diagnostic meaning had: the present level of purchasing concentration only in one firm and the inclination to treat this firm as the main provider in adequate time perspective (eg. the next year in case of the cooperation of travel agencies with the hotel chain or “in few years time” in case of the cooperation of companies with the organization certifying ISO systems).

In the table 2 essential statistical dependencies among customer loyalty and customer satisfaction are confronted. These dependencies were measured by Spearman correlation coefficients whose scores are presented in the table. Next to correlation coefficients (in brackets) approximate statistical significance is qualified. Results were analysed in two subgroups in relation to the degree of the intensity of competition between B2B providers.

Powers of correlation coefficients point out that the present customer loyalty is clearly affected by the degree, to which the seller realized customer expectations concerning the offer. This refers, however, only to sectors where intensive rivalry for the customer lasts, and not these, where few competitors appear. When the development of competitive processes is not advanced, then greater influence on the customer have existing barriers of the change of the B2B provider. Almost 60% of all examined customers noticed the existence of such barriers. The most frequently indicated limitation of the choice of supplier was the difficulty in finding a supplier accomplishing crucial quantitative-qualitative requirements. Quite often they indicated also the so-called external barriers. Such external influence can get out of an attitude of some of key stakeholders which forces the choice of particular supplier (eg. the final buyer in the

international supply chain or the principal shareholder). There were also pointed limitations with regard to propositions of law (eg. regulations of procedure of ordering in public sector firms).

Table 2. Customer satisfaction against present level of the purchasing concentration and the inclination to the purchasing concentration in the future

SPECIFICATION	TYPE OF PROVIDERS SECTOR	
	free competition	oligopoly or monopoly
Present level of the purchasing concentration	0,253 (0,028)	0,062 (0,523)
Inclination to the purchasing concentration in the future	0,392 (0,000)	0,246 (0,017)

In spite of the result that customer satisfaction cannot be treated as the reason for the present customer loyalty in all B2B sectors, the importance of this factor, however, grows up, when one tries to foresee customer loyalty in the future. Powers of correlation coefficients introduced in table 2 show that in longer time perspective customer satisfaction can be treated as significant predictor of customer loyalty even in case of markets which are at present monopolized.

The presented correlations allow to draw a conclusion concerning hypotheses H1 and H2. Statistical relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is small, but significant. It means that first hypothesis is rather false. Indeed, the loyalty of business customers is related to their satisfaction, but probably other cognitive, affective or situational factors have crucial meaning. It should be also added that the importance of satisfaction as a predictor of future loyalty is greater than current relationship between these phenomena. Another conclusion refers to H2. There appears clear difference between satisfaction-loyalty link in free competition sectors and monopoly or oligopoly sectors. However considering longer time perspective, also firms working in such market conditions like monopoly should accumulate opinions of their own customers, for the reason that these opinions will probably play crucial role, in the moment of the appearance of competitors having attractive offers at their disposal.

According to third hypothesis verification, in table 3 statistical interrelation between customer loyalty and customer recommendations is introduced. This statistical relationship is definitely significant in subgroup of free competition sectors. Actually in case of future customer loyalty this relationship is quite strong. Even if powers of correlation coefficients are lower than 0,5 it should be considered that these are results of using only single questions aimed at phenomena being analysed, not extensive questionnaire. This is why it can be concluded that customer inclination to recommend brand is synthetic effective measure of customer loyalty. Of course, it does not negate the thesis that there are other potential more efficient measures of customer loyalty even if synthetic, single questions measures are only considered.

Table 3. Customer inclination to recommend brand against present level of the purchasing concentration and the inclination to purchasing concentration in the future

SPECIFICATION	TYPE OF PROVIDERS SECTOR	
	free competition	oligopoly or monopoly
Present level of the purchasing concentration	0,245 (0,033)	0,035 (0,722)
Inclination to the purchasing concentration in the future	0,496 (0,000)	0,281 (0,006)

MANAGERIAL CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research shows that the customer loyalty in the B2B context can be measured by means of well-known techniques of marketing research. From among different available measures of the loyalty, very good results can be obtained through asking the customer whether he would give his recommendation to a certain company. On B2B market conducting written or oral references is treated as the custom, so this type of asking probably will be treated well by satisfied customers. Marketing managers should treat periodic interviews with customers as the solid element of activity of the firm on the market. Paradoxically, using several specific questions during meeting with customers will permit to obtain reliable information competitive in comparison to information gathered from complex mail questionnaires forced by periodic accreditation of ISO management systems. CRM computer systems applied in firms should be designed to take into account the results of conversations between personnel and customers. The usage of this solution creates many planning and controlling opportunities. For example, this can be practical to evaluation of the efficiency of the so-called loyalty schemes based on the distribution of different prizes to these customers who buy more.

In Poland (and also generally in EU), there is still quite a lot of B2B sectors where customers stay loyal mostly for the reason that there is not large possibility of choice than the satisfaction according to cooperation with existing supplier. In spite of this, marketing managers working in firms which kept still many State privileges must know that in longer time perspective this can be very dangerous for the growth of the firm. Customers continually seek new solutions and are very susceptible to offers of new market players. The good illustration of this threat is the changing situation on telecommunication market in Poland. Spectacular and common cases of low level of customer service on the part of Telekomunikacja Polska SA (former telephony monopolist) in connection with more and more attractive offers of mobile telephony operators caused that many customers switched to substitutes. This history should induce other firms which kept formal privileges that customer loyalty is not forever privilege or popular promotional slogan, but actually a priceless reward for adapting business processes to the needs of customers.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER PROJECTS

It seems that the sphere of customer loyalty research in B2B context could be still extensively explored by marketers. The importance of studies on loyalty measurement and loyalty determinants is even bigger when we consider popularisation of "slogan attitude" to this field spreading especially from consumer market practice. There is great a opportunity for

marketing scholars to work closely with IT providers to design analytical systems which allows for better understanding and predicting loyal behaviours of customers. It is evident that so far this opportunity was not maximally used.

There is no doubt that especially in B2B sphere marketing managers should support analysis of customer loyalty with customer profitability analysis. In conditions of cooperation with relatively (in comparison with consumer markets) low number of customers record of transactions such should be expanded to multidimensional approach incorporating field research efforts and both: qualitative and quantitative measures. It will definitely improve various loyalty strategies to implement more precise customer segmentation. Even being loyal in terms of monogamy, some customers are probably still not enough profitable to invest significant corporate resources to develop relationships with them.

The project coordinated by the author of this paper in 2006 was a stage in his long-term research concerning relationships among market subjects. Because it was realized in accordance with a model of public-private partnership, it enlarged the possibilities of Market and Marketing Research Department at University of Economics in Katowice in the sphere of scientific projects in which the businessmen from the Silesia region appear as partners. At present there is initiated a new project which contains case studies of firms operating on industrial market which have implemented CRM systems. This project will make possible the identification of main psychological and organizational barriers which make the initiation of this type of marketing solutions difficult. It is also aimed at instant improvement of CRM analytical tools.

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