

## The Czech micro and small enterprises and relations with stakeholders

### Abstract

The existence and business processes of micro and small companies are the subjects of interests of theorists and practitioners (mostly from the governmental or supragovernmental institutions) stressing mostly specificities and weaknesses (except some advantages, e.g. flexibility and innovativeness) of these types of enterprises. Marketing management falls into one area where several missing points are attributed to this type of companies. Manoeuvrability as well as marketing resources or competencies are limited compared to bigger-sized companies. This is one reason why relationships are considered of vital importance for micro and small enterprises. Among all for instance Gilmore et al and Brodie et al argue that small (and middle) companies marketing is *“largely done through networking, or a combination of transaction, relationship, interaction and networking”* (cited in Simpson, M., Padmore, J, 2005).

Some results from the exploratory survey are presented in this paper. The survey is a part of the joined research project “Relationship Marketing” of academicians from Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic which has started in the year 2006. Empirical exploratory survey was realized during last summer using in-depth interviews to get the answers to the following basic research question: “How far” are micro and small companies from these three countries with the concept of relationship marketing in managing their long-lasting relationships? Related survey objectives were formulated as follows: a) to identify existing portfolio of long-lasting relationships of surveyed companies; and subsequently for every mentioned subject to: b) find out motivation – reasons or potential benefits for or from maintaining the relationships; c) to let the respondents to evaluate the importance of each relationships for companies market success as well as the quality of each relationships; d) to identify methods/instruments/tools or activities used for maintaining the long-lasting relationships; e) discover the barriers of the relationships and finally to get probably real emotional attitude of the respondents to their partners.

Results of the survey introduced in this paper are only from the Czech Republic (because of some contractual terms among the parties). Except above given topics, the author tries to pause on other conclusions resulted from the interviews. For instance: Do micro and small companies think and behave more in relationships and interaction terms or fundamental values as for instance Gumesson stated in his phenomenal work *Total Relationship Marketing?* In other words do they manage their long-lasting relationships according the IMP interaction principles? Or do they follow more own interests, own goals with the missing element of mutuality? Since stakeholder theory was proposed to use for the survey, some other areas of interest are discussed, e.g.: Why stakeholder theory is somehow “absent” in the IMP school of thoughts, what are common and what different points of knowledge of both approaches?

**Key words:** relationships, relationship marketing, stakeholders, relationship quality, stakeholders’ importance, relationship benefits, relationship barriers

### Introduction

The existence (and quite often the start-up, too) and performance of every company is dependent on the relationships and their functioning (Håkansson, H., Snehota, I., ed., 1995) to other “members” of the market. The concept of a “relationship” itself is much discussed nowadays in many disciplines of management for the perceived and with more or less success measured proofs of importance of having good, strong, deep and long-lasting relations to those actors who help companies to do their business. While there is no common definition of relationship, some misunderstanding of what a relationship really is, can be found (Cousins, P.D., 2006). Relationships should be different from transactions or exchanges although both activities make the essence of relationships. Probably dimension of time, interdependency, depth of knowing each other and the number and quality of interaction among all can make the separating line between transaction/exchange and relationship. Webster (cited in Donaldson, B., O’Toole, T., 2002) offers the continuum of relationship types from the above mentioned transactions through repeated transactions, long-term relationships, partnerships etc. to the vertical

integration. Håkansson and Snehota stress mutual oriented interaction and commitment between two parties as a description of relationship (Håkansson, H., Snehota, I., ed., 1995).

The dyadic relationships between supplier and customer present the most frequent topic, while the interest to the rest of partners is less apparent. These two actors present the basic subjects of marketing management which can be considered as one of the main areas where relationships are studied and tried to manage. Relationship marketing and management methods and techniques can be more than suitable for small companies which are often distinguish with falling-short of marketing skills (e.g. Pasanen, M., 2005 ) on the one hand in whole marketing and management complexity while keeping good relations to the important partners from the environment as the way how to be competitive and develop entrepreneurial activity on the other hand are often introduced with the practice of micro and small and middle enterprises. Micro and small companies are often a part of very successful clusters and networks playing important roles within them (Simpson, M., Padmore, J., 2005 or Parilli, M.D., Sacchetti, S., 2006).

Knowledge how to manage relationships has not sufficiently strong theoretical base in the education system in the Czech Republic with the following consequences in the practice where intuition and everyday-problems solving substitute possible learned pieces of knowledge. Relationship management (predominantly as software for customer relationship management) or relationship marketing is taught only like a part of general marketing courses. Only very rarely special courses of relationship marketing – but not relationship management - are offered to the public. There are no empirical surveys which would show if there is any lack of knowledge reflected in practice concerning the management of relations, too. The aim of this paper is to present results of the research that tries to fill up a blank in this issue. Management of long-lasting relationships within the entrepreneurial activities of micro, small and middle Czech enterprise was the exploration matter of concern.

## 1. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Study of relations among organisations is the focus of many schools of thoughts in management and a variety of different perspectives have been adopted. Some overviews of approaches and different theoretical foundations are elaborated for instance by Donaldson and O'Toole (Donaldson, B., O'Toole, T., 2002), Stokes (Stokes, R., 2003) or Karjalainen (Karjalainen, P.T., 2008) summarizing the essential constituents of separate approaches as well as some resemblances and similarities. For the purpose of this paper three schools, namely stakeholder theory, relationship marketing and interaction approach are analysed more deeply.

If we take into account historical development of theoretical knowledge, stakeholder theory originated in 1963 when probably first definition of stakeholders was formulated. Stakeholders were defined as “those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist” (Freeman, R.E., Reed, D.L, 1983). More than 20 years later a shift was made in the definition – also an individual could be a stakeholder and not only stakeholders can affect the organisational objectives but also stakeholders could be affected by the organization (Freeman, R.E., 1984). Relationship as a basic concept was not the primary object of study among stakeholder theory advocates at the beginning. Rather the concern lied in explaining other constructs within new theoretical stream.

Opposite to perception of relationship importance in stakeholder theory, this concept plays dominant role in relationship marketing that has its roots in the same date as the previous one (the authorship of the is ascribed to Berry coining the phrase in the year 1983 (Sheth, J.N., 2002). But Sheth as well as for instance Möller and Halinen (Möller, K., Halinen, A., 2000) highlights very rich history of joining the aspects of relations to marketing activities, too.

The same significance of relations is appreciated by the representatives of Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group within the scope of their interaction approach (among all e.g. Håkansson, H., Snehota, I., ed., 1995 or Ford, D., 2001).

The topic of relations which organizations have with the subjects both from the internal and external environment has many forms, constituents, levels or contexts. Although there is much of borrowing of knowledge among the mentioned three perspectives, still many gaps in every one theory exist that can be completed to some extent with the knowledge from the other theory. There is not enough room to go through every whitespace in this paper, hence only several examples are introduced.

For example only recently stakeholder theorists started to pay more attention than before to concept of value, joint value creation, cooperation and relationships as the cornerstones of stakeholders management and/or as a critical prerequisite for organization's success (Freeman, R.E., Wicks, A.C., Parmar, B., 2004). Nevertheless, the notion of exchange relationships has been introduced earlier, e.g. by Cornell and Shapiro (Cornell, B., Shapiro, A.C., 1987). Value and value creation belong to main themes in relationship marketing followed by IMP school (e.g. Ulaga, W. Eggert, A., 2003 and Alajoutsijarvi, K. et al., 2000). Like a synonym for value or benefits and sacrifices in relationship marketing and IMP perspective the construct "stake" or interest is prevalent in stakeholder approach. Contrariwise, stakeholder theory can be distinguished by paying much more attention to the internal stakeholders or actors and as such also the link between external and internal setting is underlined compared to the both other theories.

Company in business enters in many relations – voluntary, involuntary, direct, indirect, important, less important. Dyadic relations are the most significant while the relations with other members of network or even networks can be even unrecognizable. But also these secondary or tertiary ties may have form of relations – sometimes inevitable for company's existence. Relations in network are the main object of study in the IMP perspective, while in stakeholder theory only few authors (e.g. Rowley belongs to those theorists who proposed to use network theory (social network analysis approach) to understand the influences that stakeholders could have on the organizations (Rowley, T.J., 1997) concern themselves with this issue. Relationship marketing prefers dyadic – mostly customer – supplier relations, though some broader views to other partners in network are studied, analysed and described – again mainly by the members of IMP Group in the frame of business to business marketing (e.g. Mattsson, L.-G., 1997). Stakeholder theory focuses predominantly on a focal company and its objectives, whereas the unit of analysis in IMP interaction approach is the inter-organisational relationship and in relationship marketing the issues of exchange. In other words, the concept of mutuality, sharing and meeting the goals for all actors is much more developed within interaction approach and less in stakeholder theory with the same appreciation of empirical knowledge.

Mitchell, Agle and Wood present deep insight into the various aspects of stakeholder theory explaining many factors arising during the evolution of stakeholder theory in rather comprehensive way. Clear explanation who can be a stakeholder (rights-holders, contractors, resource-providers, claimants and influencers etc.), what can be a stake (investment, risk, something of value, something that can be lost – in Clarkson conception - or any kind of interest, ownership, rights, claims, supply of resources etc.), the question of actual versus potential relationship, power, dependence and reciprocity, voluntariness versus involuntariness of stakeholders etc. Stakeholder theory, thus, can be considered as more sophisticated in stakeholders (in IMP vocabulary – actor or partner) analysis or characteristics. On the contrary, relationship atmosphere, environment and interaction process are central to IMP investigation followed by relationship marketing, but they are rare in stakeholder management on theoretical as well as empirical level. Deeper insight on what IMP members study within activity links, resource ties and actor bonds (Håkansson, H., Snehota, I., ed., 1995) cannot be found in the same extent or meaning either in relationship marketing (except IMP contribution to relationship marketing theory) or stakeholder theory as well.

## **2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

The paper presents only some results from the empirical exploratory survey which was realized during the summer 2007. The survey was a part of the joined research project "Relationship Marketing" of academicians from Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic which has started in the year 2006. Results of the survey introduced here are only from the Czech Republic because of some contractual terms among the parties.

Using conducted in-depth interviews (this was original research design of some research team members) the aim of the survey was to get the answers to the following basic research question: "How far" are micro and small companies from three countries acquainted with the concept of relationship marketing in managing their long-lasting relationships and how do they understand this concept and use it? Related survey objectives were formulated as follows: a) to identify existing portfolio of long-lasting relationships of surveyed companies; and subsequently for every mentioned subject to: b) find out motivation – reasons or potential benefits for or from maintaining the relationships; c) to let the respondents to evaluate the importance of each relationships for companies market success as well as the quality of each relationships; d) to identify methods/instruments/tools

or activities used for maintaining the long-lasting relationships; e) discover the barriers of the relationships and finally to get probably real emotional attitude of the respondents to their partners.

Proposed research design in the form of in-depth interviews had been changed during the last phase of preliminary activities of the research. Communication problems among research team members led to some shifts in research design (some researchers did in-depth interviews using prepared questionnaire only for getting basic information from the respondents while the others did only surveys) with following negative effects in quality of results. The number of surveyed respondents was 60 in total (top managers or owners - 61,7%, members of middle management – 1,7%, members of lower management – 6,6%, employees not belonging to the management – 20%) represented by Czech micro and small companies with the activity domains in one or more of three areas: production, commerce and services. 48,7 % of companies have 1 to 10 employees (micro) and 51,7% have 11 to 50 employees (small). The length of existence moves between 1 to over 15 years.

The answers to the open, semi-opened as well to the closed questions were categorized and the frequencies and arithmetic means together with the standard deviation in several cases were counted. Categorisation was another example of poor communication. Because the interest for generalization and comparability of results prevailed, most of the ideas, concepts – simply said content of respondents' speeches was not either documented or analysed. The prevalent quantitative character of survey could be considered for one of research limitations, nevertheless it was regarded as necessary for countries comparison (as mentioned above). Results cannot be generalized; they only indicate some tendencies and help to outline acquired qualitative information (Lukášová, R., Kašparová, K., 2007).

Other characteristics of sample were collected too, for instance age of the respondents, their education etc.; the analysis shows no relevance of them, however.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

The first three questions should give the picture of the relationship marketing concept understanding and use in companies' activities. They covered these three topics: 1. knowledge of the term "relationship marketing", 2. usage of the term in practice and 3. meaning of the term. Frequencies of the answers to first two questions are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Knowledge and usage of the term relationship marketing

	Knowledge of the term		Usage of the term	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	21	35,0	10	16,7
No	39	65,0	25	41,7
Total	60	100	35	58,4

The answers show that the extent of knowledge of the term is not great with even worse results concerning the usage of it (although the question could be not understood properly by the respondents). The content or the meaning of the term is perceived variously – as the management of the relationships with the customers and/or partners in the market; as utilization of marketing tools in customers' relationships; as communication tool with customers; as good relationships with customers but also as value creation for customers.

Existing long-lasting relationships with various stakeholders were mapped in the next two questions – expecting spontaneous answer followed by elicited answer. Table 3 presents portfolio of companies' stakeholders' relationships. Not every mentioned stakeholder in the survey is presented in this paper, only those with frequencies of total answers above 30%.

Tab. 3: Existing portfolio of long-lasting relationships (Q: *Could you now, please, introduce the subjects from the surroundings of your company (companies, institutions, offices or people) about who it is possible to say you have long lasting relationships with? + Q: Are there any other subjects you have long-lasting relationships with, too? For instance:)*

	spontaneous	elicited answer	Total (spontaneous and

TYPE OF STAKEHOLDER	answer				elicited answer)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Customers	51	85	9	15	60	100
Suppliers	47	78,3	13	11,7	60	100
Financial institutions	25	41,7	29	48,3	54	90
Employees	17	28,3	33	55	50	83,3
Local administration authorities	21	35	26	43,3	47	78,3
Competition	12	20	28	46,7	40	66,7
Owners	2	3,3	28	46,7	30	50
Management	4	6,7	25	41,7	29	48,3

Customers and suppliers were the only two subjects mentioned by all inquired companies. Little bit surprising could be the frequency of answers connected to financial institutions and local administration authorities. On the other hand, the results would be probably different with the different size of companies. The occurrence of competitors in the role of long-lasting relationships partners is also more specific for smaller companies.

Other types of stakeholders were mentioned answering to both questions as well, e.g. consulting companies, universities, chamber of commerce and citizens, with the frequency of answers less than 25%.

Why companies maintain long-lasting relationships, what are the important reasons or potential benefits for or from maintaining the relationships was another issue investigated with the respondents. Many types of reasons or benefits were mentioned – results of quantitative analysis using categorisation are offered in Table 4.

Table 4: Types of benefits considered as important with different stakeholders

Type of benefits	Type of stakeholder							
	Cust.	Sup.	Fin.	Emp.	Loc.	Comp.	Own.	Man.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Financial benefits / effectiveness	56,7	33,9	16,7	24			6,7	13,8
Loyalty / Confidence, trust and stability	20	25,4		34				6,9
Image building	15							
Company existing and growth	41,7							
Quality (of service)improvement		18,6	9,3					
Good atmosphere at work				22			13,3	13,8
Necessity for survival/running a business			18,5	16	23,9		16,7	20,7
Mutual cooperation benefits		25,4			13	30,8		
Source of inspiration						17,9		
Assistance, support/ Business favours			27,8		23,9			

It is quite evident that mutuality and commitment is perceived by the respondents only with some types of stakeholders – suppliers, local administration authorities and competitors and in slightly different meaning with employees, owners and managers (good atmosphere at work). The other benefits have strong “one – player” or individualistic impact seen only from the point of companies view. Customers, suppliers and competitors as primary stakeholders do not provide any perceived support that could be assigned as a benefit from relationship.

The results of relationships benefits correspond to the evaluation of the importance of relationship for market success and of relationships quality. For the assessment of importance the scale 1 – 10 was used, where 1 stands for a marginal impact on the market success and 10 for key significance for market success and for quality the scale 1-10, where 1 stands for “the minimum level of required quality” and 10 for “the best possible level of quality. Rates are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Degree of importance of relationships for the success in the market and degree of relationship quality with individual stakeholders – means (m) and standard deviation (SD)

Stakeholders	Degree of importance		Degree of relationships quality	
	m	SD	m	SD
Customers	9,7	0,9	8,4	1,5
Suppliers	7,9	2,1	8,1	1,7
Financial institutions	5,9	3,0	6,9	2,3
Employees	9,1	1,2	8,5	1,3
Local administration authorities	5,4	2,8	6,3	2,4
Competitors	5,8	2,3	5,8	2,4
Owners	8,3	2,4	8,0	2,3
Management	8,8	1,6	8,2	2,0

Both degrees of importance and degrees of quality results do not show something unexpected. Nevertheless, relationships quality was compared with the result of special test – so called Semantic selection test (Urbánek, T., 2002) - measuring unconscious emotional constituent of attitude. Czech companies have the most positive attitude to customers followed by employees, less positive but still not neutral to owners and management, neutral attitude towards suppliers and the strongest negative attitude to competitors, financial institutions and local administration authorities.

The ways, tools, methods or instruments which companies use to maintain the long-lasting relationships with their stakeholders were another topic for investigation. Results of answers are showed in the Table 6.

Table 6: Methods/instruments/tools or activities used for maintaining the long-lasting relationships

Type of method/instrument	Type of stakeholder							
	Cust.	Sup.	Fin.	Emp.	Loc.	Comp.	Own.	Man.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Quality	5,0							
Formal contracts	11,7			2,0				
Price	5,0							
Customer service	8,3							
Personal contacts/communication	50,0	35,6	25,9		28,3	10,3	13,3	24,1
Promotion tools	28,3							
Approach	18,3							
Knowledge of partner		22						
Trainings				8,0				
Salary policy and bonuses/motivation				30,0			3,3	13,8
Possibility of self-development				6,0				
Good atmosphere				30,0				
Cooperation			3,7			17,9		
Fairness						12,8		
Reliability		20,3	37,1		4,3			

Only one type of methods/instruments or tools are used towards nearly stakeholder, namely personal contacts and/or communication (and the same type is likely used also in relationships with employees). Otherwise very different approaches are applied to individual types of stakeholders, although the answers implicate the question, why more homogeneity of methods/tools/ways/instruments does not show.

Researchers decided to find out which barriers for long-lasting relationships are perceived by the companies, as well. The list of them is introduced in Table 7. In the case of owners no barrier was mentioned by the respondents.

Table 7: Barriers of the relationships

Type of barrier	Cust.	Sup.	Fin.	Emp.	Loc.	Comp.	Man.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Financial problems with customers	5,0						
Unpredictable customer behaviour	13,3						
Problems with communication	31,7	14,0		24,0		7,7	34,5
Failures in quality performance	8,3	23,7					
Barriers related with competitors	13,3						
Lack of necessary resources	5,0			2,0			
No barriers	3,3	16,9	13	16,0	8,7	5,1	3,4
Unreliability/unloyalty		14,0		18,0			
No interest in relationship		14,0					
Low effectiveness of the work				12,0			
Too high employees' expectations				8,0			
Unfair competition (manners)						35,9	
Bureaucracy			11,1		21,7		
Cost of banking services			11,1				
Negative attitude of institutions			20,4		26,1		

Communication problems and quite common negative attitudes are the most dominant barrier of the relationships mentioned with all stakeholders and what is quite interesting, particularly with customers and management. Organization to which power can be assigned, i.e. financial institutions and local administration authorities were negatively evaluated also from the point of negative attitudes. On the contrary only two stakeholders were connected with the barrier of lacking necessary resources, respectively customers and employees (but only by the minimum of respondents). Noteworthy can be “no interest in relationship” what was mentioned only with suppliers.

#### 4 LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of presented research which are necessary to mention. First, although the survey had the exploratory character, the sample size is not representative of the population of the Czech micro and small companies and the results are very far from any generalization. Second, exploratory character was suppressed by the quantitative analysis of data that ends in the lost of richness of acquired information. Third, the questions were oriented more on relationship management than relationship marketing, so the basic aim of whole research effort was somehow shifted. Fourth, some important topics (for instance sacrifices of relationships) were not inquired by the survey and the overall picture is not very complex. Fifth, only the views of one focal company were investigated, i.e. no dyadic at least or network implication of managing relations with stakeholders are known. Sixth, only actions but no interactions (even from the point of view of the focal company) were examined. And finally, although research was oriented on relationships with company's stakeholders, knowledge from stakeholder theory was not used at all in results analysis.

#### 5 CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As it was introduced before, survey which results were presented in this paper, had exploratory character trying to get answer on several questions concerning the situation of stakeholders relations management. Many issues were not covered in the interviews expecting any follow-up of the research. Notwithstanding the interrogation showed some tendencies in micro and small Czech companies in behaviour and management of relations with their primary stakeholders. Above all the lack of mutuality, interest for stakeholders, perception

of interaction benefits and effort for sharing – although it is difficult to demonstrate this argument by the results of quantitative analysis. The author of the paper can only refer to the amount of information and statements done by the respondents during interviews that should be analysed using other methods.

Together with these conclusions several implications for further research occur, i.e. not only to try to analyse the content of interviews looking for other problems, areas, respectively concepts but try to use a mix of knowledge of stakeholder theory, interaction approach and relationship marketing. While issues of relationship marketing present important substance of interaction approach, stakeholder theory in itself is rather latent in IMP studies. Although it could be argued that the difference is only in conceptual level, the challenge might be to search for similarities, discover differences, unfold interesting and new points and all these not only within theory but also within practice. Academicians examining ideas of stakeholder management can maybe find some answers in IMP interaction approach.

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