

# **Modeling Impact of Relationship Closeness on Functional Value and Quality Improvement: A Study of Select Manufacturing Firms in India**

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## **Abstract**

The present study endeavors to explore the antecedents of closeness in a purchase relationship between buyer/manufacturer and seller/supplier. It also assesses its' impact on functional value and quality improvement at buyers'/manufacturers' end. A self-administered questionnaire based survey is planned. The unit of analysis for the present research is collaborative buyer/manufacturer–seller/supplier relationship. Information is collected from a pool of 178 respondents representing the purchasing departments of select manufacturing firms in India. Data analysis is done with SPSS/AMOS. Commitment and information sharing are found significant enablers of relationship closeness while trust and mutual objectives are found statistically insignificant. Relationship closeness is found affecting functional value and quality improvement. The present study reiterates the interaction amongst various factors influencing buyer/manufacturer-seller/supplier relationship and concludes that the closeness in relationship enables functional value and quality improvement.

**Keywords:** relationship closeness, information sharing, commitment, mutual objectives, functional value, quality improvement, India.

## **Introduction**

In the domain of business to business (B2B) markets, different purchasing orientations have been influencing the purchase activity of buyer firms which are found to be ranging from transaction-oriented purchasing to relationship-oriented purchasing (Mohr & Nevin, 1990; Wilson, 1995; Moeller, Fassnachta, & Klose, 2006). Though the gradual shift from transaction-oriented purchasing to relationship-oriented purchasing has been quite evident (Wilson, 1995; Moeller, Fassnachta, & Klose, 2006), the firms have been found adopting a mix of different purchasing orientations (Lindgreen, Vanhamme, van Raaij & Johnston, 2013). This has been reportedly subject to the purchase situation wherein a firm may be highly involved with only a limited number of sellers/suppliers and have a mix of relationships that provide different benefits (Gadde and Snehota, 2000; Cousins and Spekman, 2003). This idea of developing and maintaining relationships with sellers/suppliers has reached to an extent that such relationships often start to resemble long-term partnerships (Håkansson & Snehota, 1989; Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Ford et al. 1999; Bensaou, 1999; Moller, Rajala, & Svahn, 2005).

Such relationship between buyers and sellers in a B2B domain, can take many forms (Webster, 1992) along a continuum ranging from purely discrete transactions at one end to long-term relational exchanges between interdependent partners at the other end (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Such relationships, if managed effectively, can significantly improve a buyer's/manufacturer's performance in terms of reducing costs, achieving constant improvements in quality levels, and enhancing new product design (Monczka, Trent, & Callahan, 1993; Primo & Amundson, 2002).

The literature on buyer-seller relationships report various theoretical models examining the success attributes of such relationships (Dwyer, Schurr, & Sejo, 1987; Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994; Kalwani & Narayandas, 1995). Establishing close (Ford, 1980) or even intimate (Shapiro, 1988) relationships between firms has been identified as one of the attributes to success in a relationship. The present study endeavors to explore the antecedents of closeness in a purchase relationship between buyer/manufacturer and seller/supplier. It also assesses its' impact on functional value and quality improvement at buyers'/manufacturers' end. The underlying rationale is explicated in subsequent sections of the article, starting with literature review. Subsequently a research framework signifying the enablers and outcomes of relationship closeness is proposed and tested

empirically. Information is collected from a pool of 178 respondents representing the purchasing departments of select manufacturing firms in India and analysis is done with SPSS/AMOS. At the end, theoretical and managerial implications of the study are discussed.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

This section explicates theoretical underpinning of the said phenomenon wherein an extensive literature review is carried out using keywords like buyer-seller relationship, relationship closeness, antecedents and outcomes etc.

#### **Relationship closeness**

Relationship closeness is said to get established at the long-term stage of a buyer-seller relationship when the social distance gets minimized (Ford, 1980). At this point, it is comparable with marriage which implies the need for intimacy between partners (Dwyer et al., 1987). To get close, firms tend to engage in bonding behavior which might include developing interpersonal relationships, creating specialized procedures, and dedicating some assets to the said relationship (Heide & John, 1988; Metcalf & Frear, 1993). Closeness in relationship thus is attributed as critical factor to success and is viewed as involving extensive person-to-person contact by different functional participants from each firm that may enhance the stability and longevity of such relationships (Ford, 1980, 1984; Dwyer et al., 1987; Heide & John, 1988; Metcalf & Frear, 1993; Saxton, 1997; Nielson, 1998; Goffin, Lemke, and Szejczewski, 2006; Srivastava & Singh, 2010; 2013). Though the degree of closeness offers a way to both explore and explain relationships (Goffin et al., 2006), it can reportedly improve a manufacturer's (buyer) performance in terms of reducing costs, achieving constant improvements in quality levels and enhancing new product design (Monczka et al., 1993; Primo & Amundson, 2002).

#### **Trust**

According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust denotes the confidence of one party in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity. It is reportedly the expectations by the either party in terms of coordination and fulfillment of obligations, thus it is found to be playing central role in relationship development (Dwyer et al., 1987; Moorman, Zaltman, and Desphande, 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Anderson & Narus, 1990; Ganesan, 1994; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Lewin & Johnston, 1997; Sirdeshmukh, Singh & Sabol, 2002). It is extensively recognized as a critical component of successful relationships and thus can be further hypothesized as an antecedent to relationship closeness.

H1(a): Trust in a buyer-seller relationship leads to relationship closeness.

#### **Commitment**

Commitment to a relationship has been defined as desire to develop a stable relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1992) and to maintain a valued relationship (Moorman et al., 1992). It is the degree to which the parties anticipate that the relationship will continue into the future with an indeterminate end point (Heide & Miner, 1992). It is essential for the development of long-term relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987; Anderson & Narus, 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and hence is an important indicator of relationship performance (Roberts, Varki, & Brodie, 2003). Moreover, it is a mean of differentiating successful relationships from unsuccessful ones (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Therefore it can be hypothesized as an antecedent of relationship closeness.

H1(b): Commitment to relationship leads to closeness in the said relationship.

## **Information sharing**

It has been defined as the degree to which suppliers/sellers and manufacturers/buyers exchange detailed and relevant information (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Anderson & Weitz, 1992) which sometimes can be sharing of confidential or proprietary information as well (Heide & Miner, 1992; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Bunduchi, 2008). It involves the amount, frequency, and quality of information shared between/among parties (Heide & Miner, 1992). It is reportedly an important element for buying firms' involvement with seller/supplier (Krause, 1999) not only in problem solving and conflict resolution but also in improving performance measures of either party and in creating a competitive advantage that helps to maintain effective relationships (Stuart & McCutcheon, 2000; Rao, Phillips, & Johnson, 2006). It would make buyer-seller relationships more fluent and would bring their expectations and real perceptions closer together (Hogan, 2001; Lemon, Barnett, & Winer, 2002). Thus it can be hypothesized as an antecedent to relationship closeness.

H1(c): Information sharing in a buyer-seller relationship results into closeness.

## **Mutual objectives**

The literature on mutual objectives, suggests use of different alternative terms e.g. shared values (Hunt, 1995), goal compatibility (Wilson, & Jantrania, 1994) etc. however the connotations remain consistent. It has been reportedly identified as a strong driver for continuity in a relationship (Heide & John, 1992; Wilson, Soni, & O'Keefe, 1995; March, 1997; Crotts & Turner, 1999). It encourages parties to invest time, effort and resources to create a long-term collaborative effort (Wilson, & Jantrania, 1994). It is the degree to which parties share objectives in which joint action and maintenance of the relationship is desirable thus can be hypothesized as an antecedent to relationship closeness.

H1(d): Mutual objectives in a buyer-seller relationship results into closeness.

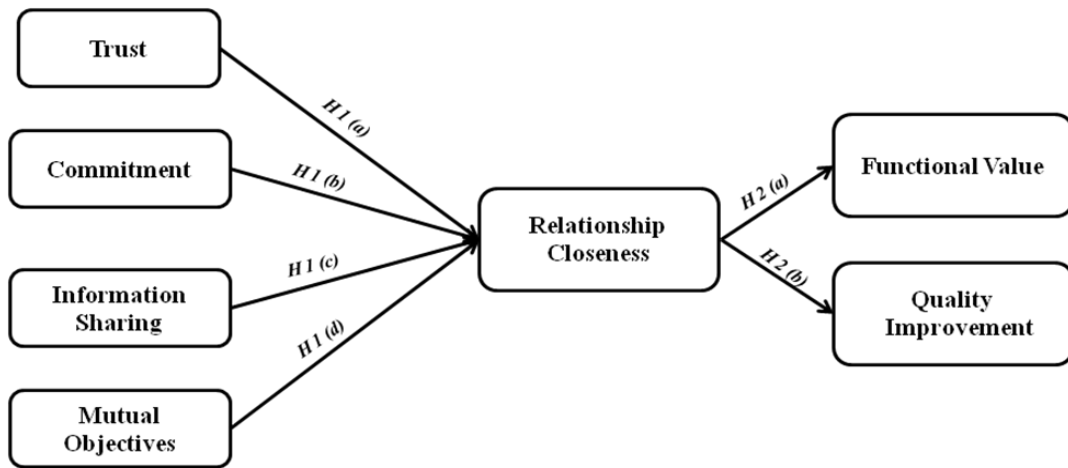
## **Functional value and quality improvement**

There is no dearth of literature on customer value wherein the phenomenon of value has been explored from varied perspectives. The present study zeroes in on the perspectives shared by Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991), Anderson, Jain and Chintagunta (1993), Anderson and Narus (1998), Ulaga (2003) and Woodall (2003) etc. in the domain of B2B. The value is said to be created if there is evidence of cost reduction, quality improvement and functional value. One of the modes to create value is through partnerships between seller (supplier) and buyer (Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne, 1991; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Walter, Ritter and Gemünden, 2001) as long-term relationships with suppliers enable firms to be more efficient in procurement as well as more effective in delivering quality and/or in reducing transaction costs (Eccles, 1991; Sheth, and Sharma, 1997). As the present study identifies relationship closeness as success attribute, same is hypothesized to have an impact on functional value and quality improvement.

H2(a): Relationship closeness affects functional value.

H2(b): Relationship closeness affects quality improvement.

Based on afore-said discussion, a research framework has been conceptualized wherein trust, commitment, mutual objectives and information sharing are hypothesized as factors resulting into closeness and functional value and quality improvement are hypothesized as possible outcomes of closeness (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Research framework**

### Methodology

A self-administered questionnaire based survey was planned to validate research framework. The unit of analysis for the present research is collaborative manufacturer–supplier relationship. The target population comprises of executives from purchasing department of manufacturing firms. A sample of 178 respondents was drawn using cluster sampling. The clusters comprised of firms manufacturing heavy pumps, engineering equipment, transformers, automobiles and consumer durable etc. Questionnaire was designed with the help of standard as well as developed constructs. These constructs were measured on 5-point response scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Table 1 depicts various construct and the respective reliability and validity. Factor loadings and the respective values of Cronbach’ $\alpha$  were significant. AMOS version 18 was used to run structural equation modeling for data analysis and hypothesis testing.

**Table 1: Constructs**

| Constructs  | Factor Loading | Cronbach’ $\alpha$ |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| <b>Trust (Morgan &amp; Hunt, 1994)</b>  |                |                    |
| <i>In our relationship, the supplier is someone to whom we give our confidence.</i>                             | 0.715          | 0.69               |
| <i>In our relationship, the supplier has high integrity.</i>  | 0.738          |                    |
| <i>In our relationship, the supplier gives us reliable information and advice.</i>                              | 0.827          |                    |
| <b>Commitment (Anderson &amp; Weitz, 1992)</b>  |                |                    |
| <i>We have a strong sense of loyalty to the supply chain process.</i>   | 0.817          | 0.82               |
| <i>We defend the supply chain process when others criticize it.</i>   | 0.730          |                    |
| <i>Our purchasing relationship is a long-term alliance.</i>   | 0.687          |                    |
| <i>We are committed to each other in the supply chain process.</i>  | 0.711          |                    |
| <i>We are patient with the suppliers when they make mistakes.</i>   | 0.675          |                    |
| <b>Mutual Objectives*</b>   |                |                    |
| <i>In our relationship, the supplier is someone with whom we share our objectives.</i>                          | 0.791          | 0.81               |
| <i>In our relationship, we often share objectives with the supplier.</i>  | 0.712          |                    |
| <i>In our relationship, the suppliers also share their objectives.</i>  | 0.746          |                    |
| <b>Information Sharing (Krause et al., 2007)</b>  |                |                    |
| <i>It is expected that the parties will provide proprietary information if it can help the other party.</i>     | 0.716          | 0.72               |
| <i>Exchange of information in this relationship takes place frequently.</i>                                     | 0.728          |                    |
| <i>It is expected that we keep each other informed about events or changes that may affect the other party.</i> | 0.711          |                    |

| <b>Relationship Closeness (Nielson, 1998)</b>  |       |      |
|--|-------|------|
| <i>Personnel from our firm have become accustomed to working with this supplier.</i>   | 0.834 |      |
| <i>We have an extensive relationship with this supplier.</i>                           | 0.671 | 0.74 |
| <i>Others in our organization have spent a lot of time working with this supplier.</i> | 0.751 |      |
| <i>Our plant people have developed close working relationships with the supplier.</i>  | 0.752 |      |
| <b>Functional Value*</b>   |       |      |
| <i>We provide customized products.</i>   | 0.685 |      |
| <i>We alter our product offerings to meet client needs.</i>                            | 0.886 | 0.76 |
| <i>We respond well to customer demand for “new” features.</i>                          | 0.674 |      |
| <b>Quality Improvement*</b>  |       |      |
| <i>We offer products that are highly reliable.</i>                                     | 0.824 |      |
| <i>We offer products that are very durable.</i>  | 0.689 | 0.71 |
| <i>We offer high quality products to our customer.</i>                                 | 0.671 |      |

\* Developed by Researcher

### Analysis and discussion

As stated above structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood was carried out with the help of AMOS (18.0). The results are shown in Table 3. The initial goodness of fit index of the model for skepticism toward green advertising was not appropriate ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 315.6, p < .001$ ). Researchers seldom have models that are not significantly different and routinely overlook the Chi-square and rely on other measures to assess their models (Hair et al, 2006). The other goodness of fit index were found meeting minimum acceptable standards and hence considered good (CMIN/DF = 1.2, GFI = .896, CFI = .893, RMSEA = .062).

The findings suggested that commitment ( $b = 0.754, p < 0.01$ ) and information sharing ( $b = 1.102, p < 0.01$ ) were found significant predictors of relationship closeness while trust ( $b = 10.844, p > 0.05$ ) and mutual objectives ( $b = -0.048, p > 0.05$ ) were not found significant predictors of relationship closeness wherein 72.5% variance of relationship closeness was explained. Here, mutual objectives was found co-varying with commitment ( $b = 0.445, p < 0.01$ ) and information sharing ( $b = 0.065, p < 0.05$ ). Subsequently relationship closeness ( $b = 0.277, p < 0.01$ ) was found significantly explaining 52.2% variance of functional value whereas, of quality improvement, closeness ( $b = 0.301, p < 0.01$ ) was found significantly explaining 51.1% variance.

The study draws a number of inferences based on the findings. The closeness in a b2b buyer-seller relationship gets established when it reaches to a stage where both the parties are committed and are ready to share information. Surprisingly trust and mutual objectives were not found significant predictors of relationship closeness however mutual objectives was found co-varying with commitment as well as information sharing which implies that mutual objectives might have indirect affect on relationship closeness. The said closeness in relationship subsequently enables buyer (manufacturer) to provide functional value and to improve quality in its offerings to the end-customers.

**Table 2: Estimates of structural equation models**

| <b>Relationship Closeness</b>                                  |                 |             |             |                |
|--|-----------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| <b>Predictors</b>  | <b>Estimate</b> | <b>S.E.</b> | <b>C.R.</b> | <b>P</b>       |
| <b>Trust</b>   | 10.844          | 63.251      | 0.171       | <b>0.864**</b> |
| Commitment   | 0.754           | 0.117       | 6.431       | ***            |
| Information Sharing  | 1.102           | 0.403       | 2.731       | 0.006*         |
| <b>Mutual Objectives</b>                                       | -0.048          | 0.122       | -0.391      | <b>0.696**</b> |
| Squared multiple correlation (SMC) = 0.725                     |                 |             |             |                |
| * Significant ( $P < 0.05$ ), **Not Significant ( $P < 0.05$ ) |                 |             |             |                |

| <b>Functional Value</b>  |                 |             |             |          |
|--|-----------------|-------------|-------------|----------|
| <b>Predictors</b>  | <b>Estimate</b> | <b>S.E.</b> | <b>C.R.</b> | <b>P</b> |
| Relationship Closeness   | 0.277           | 0.053       | 5.250       | ***      |
| Squared multiple correlation (SMC) = 0.522                     |                 |             |             |          |
| * Significant ( $P < 0.05$ ), **Not Significant ( $P < 0.05$ ) |                 |             |             |          |
| <b>Quality Improvement</b>                                     |                 |             |             |          |
| <b>Predictors</b>  | <b>Estimate</b> | <b>S.E.</b> | <b>C.R.</b> | <b>P</b> |
| Relationship Closeness   | 0.301           | 0.054       | 5.545       | ***      |
| Squared multiple correlation (SMC) = 0.511                     |                 |             |             |          |
| * Significant ( $P < 0.05$ ), **Not Significant ( $P < 0.05$ ) |                 |             |             |          |

### **Implications**

The present study reiterates the interaction amongst various factors influencing manufacturer-supplier relationship and concludes that the closeness in relationship enables functional value and quality improvement.

The study has certain limitations. It misses the dual perspective of relationship and only captures the perspectives of one party i.e. manufacturer. It could have drawn larger sample using random stratified sampling instead of cluster sampling. The study is quantitative in nature where the survey observed perceptions of respondents that might change over a period of time. The study has been carried out with an assumption of normal business conditions. The present research study can be extended to other sectors using the said framework and can also capture the dual perspective of it.

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