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Relationship management versus brand management in SME Business-to-Business marketing

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Introduction

Companies are increasingly adopting a relational approach when designing and delivering their marketing activities (De Wulf, 2001; Nancarrow et al, 2003; Lemon et al, 2002). This trend is presented as a shift from a transactional approach where brands are built and managed through broad based communication via mass media (Aaker, 1991). Though activities associated with this relational trend to marketing were initially aimed at industrial and service markets (Grönroos, 1994), technological advances in database design and capability enabled firms to apply relationship management principles and practices to mass consumer markets (O'Malley and Tynan, 1998; Winer, 2001; Corner and Hinton, 2002). This widespread application needs to be viewed with a degree of caution, for, as O'Malley and Tynan (1998) observe, there has been a tendency to approach the relationship paradigm without sufficient critical analysis. This paper discusses the suitability of relational approaches versus more transactional oriented brand management practices to inform the firm's marketing activities. We set this discussion in a case study involving a specific small to medium sized firm in the business-to-business market.

Principles of Relationship Marketing

The central thesis of Relationship Marketing (RM) is that the arguably traditional approach to marketing based on distinct transactions (Kotler, 1972; Grönroos, 1994) does not adequately describe the more frequent and iterative exchanges between businesses and their customers. The RM approach is interactive, based on the development of a dialogue between business and their customers characterised by the attempt to learn and understand each other's needs rather than a communication exchange based on the attempt to persuade and manipulate (Grönroos, 2000). Another cornerstone of RM is that of trust (Selnes, 1996), seen as an essential ingredient in facilitating such exchanges of information required to build the relationship.

With the RM approach to marketing shifting the attention of the company from a short term transaction oriented goal to a long-term relationship-building goal, the notion of a customer life cycle value (Grönroos, 1982) or Time Life Value (TLV) (Jackson, 1994; Hwang et al, 2004) becomes an important decision factor for the management and measurement of marketing activities. Valuing customers over their whole potential spend rather than maximising on single transactions (Andersen, 2001) encourages companies to give customer retention (CR) a prominent role in their marketing strategy. Customer retention is defined as the maintenance of the business relationship established between a supplier and a customer (Gerpott et al, 2001).

This longer term view is supported by research suggesting that a 5% increase in customer retention rate can increase the net present value of customers by between 25 per cent and 85 per cent (Ahmad and Buttle, 2001) or even 95% (Reichheld, 1996). This extra value is not only achieved through maintaining existing sales, but also by cross-selling and up-selling products and services (Selnes, 1995). The benefits of this longer term view are also enjoyed by firms in business-to-business relationships, where both the supplier and the buyer experience increased profitability and reduced operating costs (Mudambi & Mudambi, 1995). In addition, customer retention is crucial, as the increasing concentration of business-to-business markets may imply a shrinking customer base for the supplier (Campbell and Cunningham, 1983).

It is important to consider why retention strategies are necessary even in an environment of satisfied customers. In other words, is customer satisfaction itself not enough to retain the customers? Whilst customer retention is linked with customer satisfaction (Buttle, 1995), the link is not necessarily strongly causal; customer satisfaction does not automatically generate customer retention (Gerpott et al, 2001).

A positively satisfied customer might switch supplier or brand if he is pessimistic about the future performance of the supplier, or if competitive

suppliers with a very positive reputation actively promote their products or inform the customers about their products (Gerpott et al, 2001).

Debate on validity and applicability of RM

Concern has been expressed at the widespread application of RM and its attendant concepts of CR and LTV (O'Malley and Tynan 1998). Some detractors have dubbed RM a "popularised buzzword" (Coviello et al, 1997, p 26); while others question whether RM is supported by a robust theoretical framework (Gummeson, 1987). It is argued that it is inappropriate to implement a relationship approach in consumer markets, as, in addition to the cost of communicating individually to such large markets there is also a question mark over whether consumers wish to be in a relationship with a firm (Palmer, 1996; O'Malley and Tynan, 1998; Andersen, 2001; Zinkhan, 2002). In addition, some argue that such relationships can be characterised as coercive, a result of switching costs erected by the company in an attempt to 'tighten the grip' on the customer (Andersen, 2001). A case of "customer detention" rather than customer retention (Palmer, 1996, p. 252).

Whilst business-to-consumer RM approaches have been criticised, business-to-business practices appear more fertile for RM approaches (O'Malley and Tynan, 1998) due to more complex customer requirements creating a greater need for customisation (Homburg and Rudolph, 2001) and a degree of structural symmetry (Tikkanen and Alajoutsijarvi, 2002). RM practices in a business-to-business context include the creation of 'bonds' at the social, financial and structural level (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991) and reciprocal adaptation, where both supplier and buyer modify their performance to accommodate the other partner's needs (Ahmad and Buttle, 2001). This can involve the creation of Transaction Specific Assets (TSA); relationship related investments with little value outside the collaboration (Williamson, 1981, 1985, 1991; Mudambi & Mudambi, 1995; Ahmad and Buttle, 2001). By creating a cost to ending the

relationship these TSAs encourage mutually beneficial behaviour and reduce the likelihood of the partner firms behaving opportunistically (Williamson, 1983).

RM as a route to increased CR in the business-to-business sector is not without challenge. A long term relationship between companies has its drawbacks as well as its benefits for both client and supplier. The creation of bonds associated with RM can create negative "lock in" effects; these arise from the costs incurred to adapt products and services; the adoption of technologies exclusively aimed at servicing the particular firm (such as EDI); and the information search necessary to customise the products (Campbell and Cunningham, 1983; Håkansson & Snehota, 1992; Tikkanen et al, 2000; Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi 2002). For example, this information search can include numerous meetings between supplier and buyer to discuss product specifications, and subsequent feasibility studies. A lot of these activities might take place before any return on investment is accrued. These investments can restrict the freedom of the supplier to respond to environmental changes such as new competitors, declining fortunes of clients and new opportunities.

One particular situation that can make such investments negative is when the client company manufactures products that do not use innovative technology, and the supplier relying disproportionately on that buyer for their business risks tying up resources that could be better deployed in technologically innovative activities (Håkansson & Snehota, 1992).
The supplier is effectively pulled away from developing innovation. An example of this is the over-reliance of a major Italian automotive electronics supplier on business from the largest automotive manufacturer in Italy. The delay in adoption of advanced electronics by the latter put the automotive electronics supplier at a disadvantage against other European rivals such as Lucas and Bosch.

As relationship management strategies require a reciprocal adaptation (Ahmad and Buttle, 2001; Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi, 2002) of a client's

activities and procedures, the client can also experience the negative side of such customised service (Håkansson & Snehota, 1992). As well as experiencing the previously described lock-in effects arising from their own TSAs, the prospect of these lock-in effects may deter potential clients from entering such a relationship. Companies should not invest in relationships when customers do not have intention to enter these (Kumar et al, 2003).

Business-to-business markets contain a wide variety of firm sizes and concentration levels. Firms are heterogeneous for type of industry, size of customers, wealth and financial resources and knowledge and experience (Eriksson and Mattson, 2002). For instance, in the US market there are circa 360,000 manufacturers employing more than 100 staff and making around 75% of products; and around 5 millions of smaller businesses employing less than 20 employees (Hutt and Speh, 2004). Where the market is fragmented and heterogeneous - made up of large numbers of small and diverse firms and sole traders – the limitations applying to the use of RM in consumer markets may also apply to certain B2B markets (Ringberg & Gupta, 2003). The implementation of RM in these conditions becomes difficult because of the wide range of products and services adaptation required, the diversity and volume of information, and the need for customised transactions (Eriksson and Mattson, 2002). In such fragmented markets the small size of the business transactions and the frequency of interactions associated with an RM approach make such one-to-one communications expensive.

Brand dominated retention strategies

Given the above context, brand marketing strategy seems to offer a feasible alternative to the two - way personalised dialogue advocated by the RM approach. Brand dominated marketing strategies involve a more symbolic communication process between the business and its customers (Aaker, 1991; Ringberg and Gupta, 1993; Michell et al, 2001). Here customer retention is increased through the notion of loyalty; the

propensity to re-purchase a supplier's product or service due to favourable attitudes toward the brand held by the customer (Gerpott et al, 2001).

Brand marketing strategies involve persuasive communication to the customers of a system of values, associations and attributes the brand is claimed to possess through the use of skilful advertising on appropriate media (Kotler et al, 1996; Palmer, 1996), or alternative strategies such as promotion or sponsoring of events, sampling, publicity, PR and other attention grabbing activities (Aaker, 1991). A brand is defined as a "distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as logo, trademark, or pack design) intended to identify the goods and services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors" (Aaker, 1991, p. 7). The communication activities of a company aim at persuading potential buyers that their brand possesses, more than any other, the attributes they seek; they also endeavour to confer emotional values to that brand by associating it with a set of values, or a particular dream or ideal, with which potential buyers might identify (de Chernatony, 1996; Michel et al, 2001). A brand is associated with functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 1991). For example, a craftsman can see a brand of industrial products as a self - expression of competence in his own profession. These associations can be created by associating the brand, for example, to a symbol, a character, a specific attribute or benefit, or a usage occasion (Aaker, 1991). A wealth of research has concentrated on branding in consumer markets, but not much on brands as applied in business-to-business markets (Hague and Johnson, 1994; Michel et al, 2001).

The supposed rationality of the purchasing process in a business-to-business context would suggest that brand marketing strategies would not be the best use of company resources in business-to-business markets (Wilson, 1973). However, in the case of fragmented markets made up of small firms with informal organisational practices such a view does not hold (Ringberg and Gupta, 2003). Smaller firms arguably respond to the

more emotional, symbolic communications as practiced in brand marketing strategies (Ringberg and Gupta, 2003).

Decision criteria between Brand Management and Relationship Management

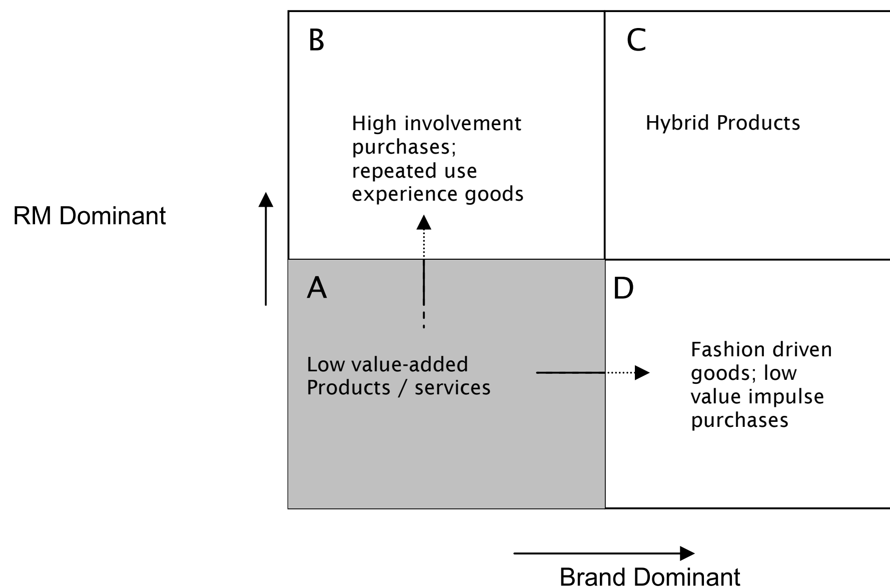
It is of course possible to argue that brand management and RM are complementary and the choice between the two is not an exclusive one (Palmer, 1996). A company may engage in mass market branding activity to support a relationship, or a relationship marketing programme may be designed to assist in building a brand. Whilst this notion of complementarity is defendable theoretically, for small to medium size enterprises there is a very real issue of resource constraints, such as shortage of capital, ability to get funding and insufficient number of employees involved in marketing (Graham, 1996; Brooksbank et al, 1999; Hill et al, 2002). In addition, there is also an issue of limitations in marketing knowledge, expertise and commitment necessary for the successful implementation of marketing programs (Brooksbank et al, 1999; Blankson and Stokes, 2002; Hill et al, 2002). Such firms need to ensure that they select the most appropriate marketing strategy for their particular firm, product range and client base, as dividing resources in order to support these two approaches may stretch resources and result in inadequate funding. Brand strategies require large investments in media communications (Aaker 1991), the costs of which may even grow in the future because of increasing media costs (Urde, 1994); while a relationship approach requires the development and support of information and knowledge management competencies and infrastructure technology (O'Malley and Tynan, 1998; Fletcher, 2001). Consideration of all the above results in the recommendation to small and medium firms to view the two approaches (relationship and brand based) as alternatives.

This paper takes concern over RM's applicability and investigates whether the customer retention strategies advocated as part of a RM approach work in the small, medium enterprise (SME) business-to-business sector.

It concerns specifically asymmetric business-to-business relationships (Ringberg and Gupta, 2003), involving routine purchases of low value-added products and services that represent a limited proportion of the customer's spend. Through case study analysis of a UK SME, we discuss whether the deployment of relationship management or a brand management approach is a more suitable use of such a company's resources.

To illustrate this resourcing decision the following matrix has been developed, based on Palmer's *brand – relationship marketing strategy continuum* (Palmer, 1996). Whilst the matrix can be used both in business-to-consumer and business-to-business markets, this paper concerns itself with application to business-to-business situations. Business-to-consumers references are provided for illustration purposes only.

Fig 1 Customer Retention Strategy Matrix



The proposed matrix above aims at positioning products and industries in four quadrants with the purpose of aiding decision making on the type of customer retention strategy recommended for a company specific industry and position in the matrix.

The matrix works as follows: the horizontal axis represents a scale of brand dominated retention strategies. On this axis the marketing communication strategies become increasingly emotional, symbolic and one-way in nature. An example of products that can be positioned in quadrant D (Fig 1 above), where the character of the company's communications with its customers is brand dominated, are such products as fashion goods and FMCGs, such as confectionery. In the business-to-business market, an example is 3M, which produces, amongst other things, a range of chemical products aimed at the trades.

On the vertical axis, the company's communication strategies become increasingly interactive and one-to-one in nature, to satisfy a need for reciprocal information exchanges. Products and services which will be positioned in quadrant B (Fig 1 above) are products requiring a level of customization to cater for specific customers (Palmer, 1996; O'Malley & Tynan, 1998). An example of this in the business-to-business sector is SAGEM, a company supplying, amongst other, engine management systems (EMS) for automobiles and motorcycles. The company develops custom made software for their clients depending on the specification of the vehicle under design.

For some products, communications will be both brand dominated and RM dominated in nature. This is the case for products and services where there is an obvious need for two-way exchange of information and feedback, but also a need for branding, such as ICT, where there is both a need for customization as well as service and after-sale service, and, at the same time, a need for brand equity to generate confidence in the buyer. Companies in quadrant C face the difficult challenge of balancing a situation where investments in brand equity are accompanied by investments in RM strategies in what appears to be a trade off.

An illustrative example for the B2B sector would be the provision of financial services such as factoring and investments.

The remaining quadrant A is one where a company has adopted neither one nor the other customer retention strategy. In this quadrant we can place products with low added value or commodities, such as salt, sugar in consumer markets or nuts and bolts in business-to-business markets. These are products for which customers' criteria for supplier selection is likely to rely on price, and it may therefore be suggested that a supplier would be vulnerable to customers switching to other suppliers offering products at a lower price. In such cases we would recommend that in order to retain their customers, a company should move in a chosen direction on the matrix.

The criteria firms can examine in order to identify the most appropriate positions of the matrix include the type of products or service; the scale of purchase (Minett, 2002); relationship intention (whether the customer wants a relationship approach); customer heterogeneity (diverse types of customers in business as well as consumer markets); exchange characteristics such as purchase frequency, purchased amount and combination of products and services purchased; and costs vs. benefits assessment of a relationship approach, including financial criteria for decision such as return on investment (Kumar et al, 2003). The authors also propose additional criteria to aid the decision. These include costs to create a new brand or create infrastructure for RM; feasibility when a brand is weak or underdeveloped; the need for a supplier to integrate in a business network (Eriksson & Mattson, 2002; Tikkanen, 2002); level of fragmentation and heterogeneity of markets (Eriksson & Mattson, 2002; Ringberg and Gupta, 2003; Hutt and Speh, 2004) Size and characteristics of players; and type of purchasing policies - informal vs. formal (Ringberg and Gupta, 2003).

One way of including the above variables in a company assessment of a suitable strategy is to answer the following questions:

- Is there a requirement for a two-way information exchange?
- Is after sales service / support required / feasible? (O'Malley and Tynan, 1998; Kumar et al, 2003)
- Do the products / services and the diversity of their applications allow for adaptation, customization and added value? (O'Malley And Tynan, 1998; Eriksson and Mattson, 2002)
- What are the cost implications of the required product and service adaptations?
- What is the level of heterogeneity and fragmentation in the market? (Eriksson and Mattson, 2002)
- Is the customer integrated in a network of business relationships? (Eriksson and Mattson, 2002; Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi, 2002)

A Note on Methods

The paper will use a case study approach to investigate the issues identified. This is a holistic approach to data collection (Ahmad and Buttle, 2001) which involves investigation and analysis of phenomena within their real life context (Perry, 1998). Case study methodology is a type of inductive method, which aims at building grounded theory based on the case study or a series of case studies (Perry, 1998). The methodology can be used to test theory, to test particular issues or aspects of a theory as well as to develop new theory (Meredith, 1998); at the same time, it can offer the opportunity to analyse critical incidents that determined a course of events within the context of a longitudinal study (Meredith, 1998; Perry, 1998; Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi, 2002).

Case study methodology encourages the use of multiple sources of data (Meredith, 1998). Accordingly, this paper will be drawing on secondary sources such as financial records, meeting minutes, memoranda, business plans as well as primary in the form interviews and observation. As the research is part of a Department of Trade and Industry funded research

programme[1] involving the university and the firm, access to secondary and primary data is expected to be full and supportive.

Case study approach has been chosen as it offers the possibility of generating rich contextual data that can be used to build theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Although regarded as a valuable method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Yin, 1981; Eisenhardt, 1989) there are necessarily concerns over the 'generalisability' of the findings particularly when only involving one firm. We acknowledge this view and will therefore use the case study as part of a two stage research process. The first stage will be to generate propositions that will then form the basis of further research conducted across a range of firms and industry sectors.

The firm that will provide the case study is a UK SME specialising in the stocking and packaging of various types of wiping cloths for industrial use. The company, which has been in existence for over a hundred years, sells to various industrial sectors, such as automotive manufacturing and aftermarket, food manufacturing and catering. The company also acts as a representative for Europe of an American manufacturer of "branded" synthetic wiping cloths. The characteristics of the product, in spite of the existence of various types of "specialist" wiping products, make of it a low value added type of product of very low cost, which would represent a very small percentage of the expenditure of an industrial customer.

Concluding remarks

This working paper has examined an existing debate between the applicability of Relationship Management and branding dominated customer retention strategies. We have then identified decision variables that might enable firms to select the most appropriate retention strategy. The next stage of the research project is to evaluate the relevance and utility of the proposed selection criteria, through interviews and analysis of the

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[1] This type of programme is called a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) and is a vehicle to bring universities and local businesses together.

company's activities. The value of the research lies in the focus of these issues on an under-examined field; that of SMEs providing low value added products and services.

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