THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SCALE FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF INTERNAL MARKETING IN SERVICE FIRMS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the process of internal marketing within the context of relationship marketing as it applies to the services industries. The specific context of the present study is centered on the banking industry. A majority of studies have focused on the customer perspective, but have neglected to obtain managerial input. Thus, a scale was developed and tested which represented issues from the managerial perspective. Scale development was based on a two step process. First, four focus groups were conducted. The results of which were utilized in the development of a scale. The scale was tested via a survey sent to more than 5000 bank managers. The scale represents those elements comprising managerial input. These processes (i.e. planning, hiring, training, salaries, equipment, etc.) are typically done out of the sight of customers, but are crucial to the effective delivery of promises. The results of the study provide empirical support for the proposed scale, and provide the basis for measuring managerial input and perceptions. The scale suggests there are two dimensions for enabling promises which include the management-employee and the employee-customer interaction. The end result can have managerial implications in regards to resource allocation.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last thirty years, the concept of relationship marketing has managed to bridge the gap between academicians and managers. Bagozzi maintained that while marketing relationships are central to developing marketing theory, relationship marketing is the basis for marketing strategy (Gounaris et al., 2007; Bagozzi, 1995; Bagozzi, 1974). Research indicates the concept may be a win-win situation since long term customer relationships are not only beneficial for the firm but also for the customer (Gounaris, 2005; Gwinner et al., 1998; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Indeed, devoting organizational resources to sustain relationships is one key to comparative advantage in the marketplace (Hunt and Morgan, 1995).

Taking a broad perspective, most examinations of relationship development issues tend to focus on the external customer. This study represents the first step in developing a scale that examines the internal customer perspective, in terms of the organizational inputs that support the efforts of personnel to obtain long term customer relationships. The results provide a measurement scale, directions for further research, and managerial implications for developing effective strategies that enable the internal customer. The research begins with a review and integration of the relationship literature.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Relationship marketing has at its roots in the concept of relational, on-going exchanges as opposed to discrete, one-time exchanges (Bagozzi, 1974). For services, relationship marketing has been a naturally evolving strategy due to the customer involvement in the performance of the service and the direct interaction between customer and service provider/firm (Bloemer and Odekerden-Schroder, 2007).

Service firms typically use a combination of external, interactive and internal strategies to communicate with various constituents. The external marketing strategies are obviously directed at the customer. Gronroos (1983) describes the external marketing strategies as essentially the four Ps (service design, pricing, distribution and promotion). The communication of these strategies has been characterized as promises of service delivery outcomes, with the intention to change or encourage specific behaviors in current or potential customers. General concepts derived from the norms of reciprocity would suggest that promises generally represent specific rewards which are expected in return for patronage behavior (Bloemer and Odekerden-Schroder, 2007). Promises have been found to be particularly effective in influencing future patronage when the prospective customer has had little or no prior experience with the organization (Gounaris, 2005). Thus, the customer becomes dependent on the information provided in the promise in order to make their initial evaluations of the organization. Yet, customers that are currently patronizing a service entity will also utilize promises as a standard for developing expectations regarding ongoing service delivery (Smith, 2011, and San Martin and Camarero, 2005). Thus, for current customers, the longevity of the relationship will impact their reliance on promises, and their interpretation of those promises (Henneberg, 2005). Thus, the traditional marketing activities that set the initial stage of the relationship by getting the attention of the customer, setting an image of the company and setting customer expectations (Nasr et al., 2012).

Interactive marketing takes place between the customer and the employee(s) of the service firm (Gronroos, 1983). The strategies take place simultaneously with the delivery of the service. It is the point at which, not only is the service exchanged, but also value delivered. The "art of relationship marketing" takes place during the value delivery (Eid, 2007), which is key to effecting customer loyalty and increased profits (Jones and Taylor, 2007). Gronroos (1983) explained that during the interaction there are two products delivered upon which customers can judge quality - the functional service and the technical service. The technical service is comprised of the actual service process. During this process service employees may use systems or other resources to deliver the service.

Functional service is comprised of employees' appearance and manners, their routines and their interaction techniques. It is the functional service that the service firm can use as a competitive advantage by building customer dependence (Snell and White, 2009). For example, if a bank teller is not only able to efficiently and reliably handle a customer's transaction, but also answers questions about other services, or call the customer by name, or help the customer to complete a form, these behaviors tend to make the customer more dependent on the service provider, thus increasing the switching costs for the customer (Jones and Farquhar, 2007).

Internal marketing strategies occur between the company and the employees and help enable the interactive marketing strategies. The internal marketing strategies have been referred to as the process of enabling promises. The enabling of promises requires that the service system and employees have the skills, abilities, tools, and motivation to deliver the promise (Bitner, 1995). Many of the components to enabling promises are derived from employees' innate

abilities. Yet, most skills are developed through appropriate training programs, and functionalized through the allocation of tools (equipment) which most efficiently support their job tasks. To be most effective, these innate and learned abilities must be utilized and focused (Nguyen and Leclerc, 2011). This can often be accomplished through the implementation of a service mission which drives the offering and steers the organization. The mission can empower and guide employees within the organization, and can provide the belief that employees can achieve personal and organizational goals (Ueno, 2013).

This can be accomplished through empowerment, which can be defined as the practice of giving employees expanded authority to solve customer problems as they arise (Gill et al., 2006). To effectively utilize the strategy of empowerment, it must be incorporated in training programs. While quality skill training is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure customer satisfaction. Thus, empowerment training will prepare employees to recognize and understand customer needs, and develop skills that are necessary to solve common customer problems (Ueno, 2103). Empowerment can then improve customer service because the employee will be able to display empathy and increase their responsiveness to the customer. When problems arise with a customer relationship, employees should be empowered to make immediate decisions and take prompt actions (Narayandeas and Rangan, 2004). By delegating such decision making power, management signals its' understanding that salespeople have the ability to solve customer problems and to create solutions that are satisfactory to both the customer and the organization (Odekerken-Schroder and Bloemer, 2004). This overall empowerment process can be accomplished by providing appropriate training programs and support equipment, and then by stressing employee personal involvement, instituting a state of mind yielding control, awareness, accountability and shared responsibility (Keith et al., 2004).

Management should also be concerned with the employee motivation, which can be directed by modeling their behaviors (Chenet et a., 2010). Specifically, management should promote an attitude that represents a love for the business, and empathy towards the customer (Birgit, 2009). Management must also promote cooperation and trust among employees to facilitate teamwork. Finally, it is important to incorporate an ethical environment which encourages integrity, fairness, and consistency (Bejou et al., 1998). The products of internal marketing are part of the work environment (Frimpong, 2014). Internal marketing is a top-down strategy beginning with management and the philosophy employed to develop a service environment that supports the interactive strategies (Roberts and Campbell, 2007). Wetsch (2005) suggests that the strategy is directed at the human resources of the firm with the purposes of making sure all employees are knowledgeable about the business, customers, and competition, and prepares and motivates employees to exhibit service oriented behaviors.

The product of internal marketing (the service environment), should in and of itself be a strong motivator for service oriented behaviors and quality interactive marketing (Symonds et al., 2007). As well, the environment should support the creation and delivery of value. It is through supporting quality interactive marketing and the creation and delivery of value that customer relationships are managed (Roig et al., 2006).

The following study examines the process associated with one of the three strategies as a factor of customer relationship commitment within a single service context. By using a single context, one could examine the perspective of managers on the internal marketing strategies that influence their motivation to maintain customer relationships with the firm. The following methodology explains the process for measuring and analyzing this association.

METHODOLOGY

In order to develop operational definitions of internal marketing, a series of focus groups and a survey were utilized. Focus groups are a very useful means of obtaining general background information about a topic of interest, and learning how respondents talk about phenomena of interest (Hair et al. 2010). This in turn may facilitate the design of survey instruments or other research tools that might be employed in quantitative research (Hair et al. 2010). The survey is also important because it can provide an objective evaluation of the categories and definitions that are derived from a focus group analysis. This helps to insure that the descriptors for each construct are logical and appropriate.

Focus Groups

In this study, we conducted 4 focus groups with 28 bank managers with an average of 7 participants per group. The participants were recruited over a four week period, and the session was coordinated for the 4 separate groups over a weekend. The incentive used was a twenty-five dollar certificate to a local restaurant, in exchange for one hour of their time. The focus group was conducted in a conference facility provided by the university. The average age of the participants was 37 years, and the average length of banking experience was 9.1 years. In terms of gender, there were 12 males and 16 females in attendance.

The sessions were transcribed and audio recorded, while the moderator facilitated the discussions. The discussions explored the idea of enabling promises, and focused on the participant's interpretation of the various promises that the bank facilitates. After the focus groups were conducted, the transcriptions and audio recordings were cross referenced in order to develop a complete picture of the results. The transcripts were then reviewed in order to determine what types of themes, issues, and items might exist in regards to the idea of promises.

Several themes were readily evident upon this initial analysis. For instance, it was evident that the managers felt that issues involving hiring, training, salaries, and equipment were critical elements to delivering services. In fact, the participants readily provided information regarding their interpretations of these events. The following discussion outlines the major influences and attributes that were derived from the focus group discussions. The attributes were the specific events or actions that the respondents identified as being the actual components for the facilitation of promises.

Results

Internal marketing can generally be described as processes that stops and starts with mid-level managers, so it seemed viable to ask their perceptions of these enabling processes. In fact, the participants proved to be very astute in their ability to analyze and describe these processes. They often admitted that while they may not directly participate in every process of enabling promises, they did in fact know what processes were necessary to facilitate this action. In other words, the participants stated that they could judge how each employee was motivated, and they could evaluate whether those employees were in fact motivated. For instance, the participants were aware of how the organization motivated the employees, and they suggested that the employees were motivated if they had a commitment to quality, they were willing to go the extra mile, they enjoyed their job, etc. This is important because motivated employees are indeed a

component contributing to the process of enabling promises, and it was fascinating that the bank employees had such insight and ability to interpret this type of process. Other influences that the participants mentioned included employee selection, training, teamwork, tools, strategies, and recovery training. One participant described this as being the overall environment in which the employee worked, which could positively or negatively contribute to their (the employee) service performance. Other participants suggested that they regularly evaluated this environment, and that this evaluation influenced their overall evaluation of their superior.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Table 1
Enabling Promises</th></tr>
<tr><th>Influences</th><th>Attributes</th></tr>
<tr><td>Selection</td><td>Skilled/qualified</td></tr>
<tr><td>Training/skills</td><td>Knowledge
Ability
Courtesy
Informative
Accurate service
Responsiveness
Friendliness
Technology</td></tr>
<tr><td>Teamwork</td><td>Respect for others</td></tr>
<tr><td>Tools</td><td>Up-to-date equipment
Reliable tools
Accessible</td></tr>
<tr><td>Motivation</td><td>Empowerment
Commitment to quality
Willing to go the extra mile
Enjoys job
Proud of affiliation with bank
Engenders trust
Sociable
Accessible</td></tr>
<tr><td>Strategy</td><td>Takes time to educate customer
Exceeds promises
Attends to details
Fairness, Ethical
Indicates quality is central
Clearly know role</td></tr>
<tr><td>Recovery Training</td><td>Ability
Empowerment
Knowledge</td></tr>
</table>

These types of interpretations and descriptions are important for service organizations because the service personnel represent the organization, and consumers will make judgments regarding the organization based on their experiences with the personnel. Thus, the organization will be viewed positively when the service personnel perform well, but the organization will be judged poorly when the service personnel perform poorly (Unfortunately, customers tend to remember the service failures much more readily than they remember the service successes).

Table 1 illustrates the general results regarding the different influences or processes that contribute to enabling promises, and the specific attributes which contribute to each influence.

Survey

The next step in the study was to develop a scale that can extend our understanding of customer relationship commitment by examining those managerial inputs to the work environment that might support internal marketing strategies within a banking context. In order to facilitate our understanding of these managerial inputs, bank marketing managers nationwide were surveyed. For the survey instrument, we used the results of the focus groups and descriptions of internal marketing offered by Gronroos (1990), George (1990) and Berry and Parasuraman (1991) and Sharma (2007), which helped to generate twelve items that might reflect managements' beliefs about internal marketing strategy. The items reflected many of themes from the focus groups such as actively recruiting and training personnel, motivation, creating the appropriate environment for nurturing and motivating personnel, measuring performance and rewarding personnel. The items were attached to a 7 point Likert scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. The items were reviewed by ten bank marketing managers (not included in the previous focus groups or subsequent survey) for wording, clarification and logic with suggestions incorporated in the final survey. Bank marketing managers were chosen because of the nature of their role within the bank. Although a quasi-member of management (often not directly involved with financial strategy), they are close to management and often are responsible for the internal marketing strategies. As well, they are the recipients of internal marketing strategies. Based on their unique boundary spanning position, they should be able to bridge the company and employee perspectives. The survey began with the following paragraph.

> "Banking often uses its' front line personnel as a positioning tool to achieve competitive advantage. This may be done by recruiting the best available people and providing appropriate training. The training may be operational so your personnel can efficiently and reliably serve customers. The training may also be motivational so your personnel can convey an essence of quality service. The bank may monitor personnel to not only indicate problem service areas but also reward service excellence. Below is a list of statements regarding various managerial inputs. Next to each statement please indicate your agreement with the statement as it applies to your bank and its management by circling the appropriate number from "1" for strongly disagree to "7" for strongly agree."

Twelve statements regarding management's beliefs about internal marketing activities followed the description. The survey also included demographic questions.

Sample and Data Collection

The survey was conducted via Survey Monkey, and email invitation was sent to a stratified sample of 5000 bank managers across the country. There was no advance notice, but there were two email follow-ups to encourage participation. The survey procedure resulted in 1002 responses with 870 usable for analysis. The response rate was respectable (20.4 percent

return, 17.4 percent usable), and it is indicative of other survey results when the sample is comprised of professionals (Sharma 2007).

The characteristics of respondents indicated the bank marketers had an average of 16.2 years in the banking industry and 10.6 years in charge of bank marketing. Most (54.0 percent) were in charge of not only advertising but also public relations for the bank. A number (23.0 percent) were also responsible for the sales of financial services made by front-line personnel. The sample represented banks that were quite varied in size ($88 million in assets to $25 billion in assets) with a median asset value of $353 million.

Results

Following the procedure used by Gwinner, Gremier and Bitner (1998) in their examination of customer benefits resulting from a service relationship, the items were factor analyzed using a common factor analysis with varimax rotation to determine not only the underlying structure but also the dimensionality. The exploratory factor analysis, using a varimax rotation and Cronbach alpha analysis, sought items that met the criteria of a) loading more than .50 on a factor, b) not loading more than .50 on two factors, c) having a communality of .50 or more, and d) having an item-to-total correlation of more than .40 (Hair et al. 2010). Factors were then labeled based on the items they contained.

The twelve original items were reduced to ten based on the analysis criteria, as such, two of the items had a loading of less than .50. These two items are listed at the bottom of Table 2. The two-factor solution is illustrated in Table 2, with the first factor containing seven items, labeled "Management-Employee Environment," resulting in an eigenvalue of 5.85, variance explained of .58, and a Cronbach α reliability of .92. The second factor contained three items and was labeled "Employee-Customer Environment." This factor had an eigenvalue of 1.09, variance explained of .11, and Cronbach α reliability of .81. A 2-tailed t-test found the mean for the two factors to be significantly different (t 5.77, p<.000: 1,86df). The two-factor solution tends to indicate that there are two distinct parts to the internal marketing product of the work environment. The first factor focuses on the management and employee relationship characteristics. The items that loaded on this factor involve developing the employee through effective hiring, training, empowerment, and reward. The second factor represents the employee-customer environment in terms of the expectations that management has regarding the customer interaction.

DISCUSSION

To explore the internal marketing product of the work environment, bank managers were surveyed regarding the managerial activities that support interactive marketing strategies. Findings indicated that the work environment is comprised of two distinct and significantly different parts. The first part is an environment where the focus is on the management-employee, and the second part is an environment where the focus is on the employee-customer with a greater managerial emphasis on the employee-customer part.

The management-employee dimension can be described as the processes of hiring, training, and empowering the employees. In order to facilitate these aspects, it is important to have the appropriate resources in place such as networks, facilities, equipment and procedures. It

may seem obvious, but it was interesting to note management's interpretation and commitment to well qualified and prepared employees.

Table 2 Descriptives and Factor Analysis Results				
Scale Items	Mean	SD	Mgt-Emp[a]	Emp-Cust[b]
Our management believes in training personnel so they have the skills to provide quality customer service.	4.84	1.58	0.89	0.26
Our management believes in nurturing service leadership.	4.69	1.42	0.85	0.26
Our management believes in empowering personnel to best serve our customers.	4.90	1.53	0.82	0.25
Our management believes in rewarding excellent customer service.	4.86	1.87	0.77	0.35
Our management believes in developing an environment for teamwork.	5.01	1.60	0.74	0.34
Our management believes in measuring performance of our service personnel.	4.90	1.59	0.69	0.40
Our management believes in competing for the best available talent.	4.68	1.48	0.60	0.23
Our management believes our personnel should exceed customer expectations in service.	5.61	1.71	0.22	0.82
Our management believes in standing behind the service our personnel provide customers.	5.56	1.37	0.34	0.80
Our management believes it is important for personnel to emphasize trust when dealing with customers.	5.63	1.45	0.27	0.78
[a] eigenvalue 0.85 variance = 0.584 Cronbach α = 0.918 mean = 4.84			[b] eigenvalue = 1.09 variance = 0.109 Cronbach α = 0.808 mean = 5.60	
Our management communicates a customer oriented philosophy to the employees as a mode of direction.	3.89	1.43	0.21 Removed	0.14
Our management team expresses their enjoyment of their job as a motivation factor for employees.	3.76	1.40	0.19 Removed	0.13

The employee-customer dimension is more focused on managerial expectations of service delivery characteristics. There was an emphasis on communicating trust, exceeding expectations, and delivering superior customer service. This dimension of employee-customer appeared to be of significance importance with higher means than that of the management-employee dimension.

Based on the results, enabling promises was interpreted from the manager's point of view as a commitment from the organization to provide the employees with training programs and appropriate equipment. Management must instill an environment within the organization that motivates and inspires the employees. This environment should empower the employee so they have the ability and authority to help the customer with a majority of their needs. This overall process would then produce employees that could facilitate the delivery of the service, because they had the appropriate environment in which to work.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenge for service firms might be to identify the strategies and their products that would most influence a customer's commitment to a relationship. The research indicates that the interactive product of functional service delivery is a critical influence on the customers' commitment to a service relationship. The service management prescriptive indicated by the research would therefore involve developing quality functional service delivery and support for this through the work environment. Specifically, management could aggressively recruit service providers that genuinely enjoy customer interaction. Recruitment should be followed by not only the standard technical training but also motivational training to ensure responsiveness, and attention to detail so the customer gets the impression that quality is a central concern on the part of the provider. Further, managers could include setting clear performance standards and reward service providers that meet or exceed these standards. It would also seem prudent for marketing managers to periodically survey their internal customers to see if the beliefs of management are being translated into observable actions by those on the front lines. The results of this study has yielded a ten item scale, which is presented in Table 3, that can be used to measure internal marketing in service firms.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the research has found that the functional service delivery product of interactive marketing demands a service manager's attention and support via internal marketing, the study has certain limitations. One limitation of the research was that the research was conducted in one service context - banking. Although this allowed for a managerial perspectives without the possible confound of various contexts, this causes a problem with generalizability across service contexts. The response rate was fairly normal for a survey of professionals (Hair et al. 2010). A limitation worth noting was that a large percentage of participants were involved in marketing activities, possibly skewing the results due to greater knowledge and understanding of the concepts. Since the research was exploratory in nature, future research should expand and refine the measures used in the study to permit full validation of the constructs. The scale should also be tested and modified for additional participants, such as front line employees. Once the measures of internal marketing are validated, a predictive study might be possible where the measures for internal marketing are connected to actual customer loyalty/retention rates.

Table 3: Final Scale

Banking often uses its' front line personnel as a positioning tool to achieve competitive advantage. This may be done by recruiting the best available people and providing appropriate training. The training may be operational so your personnel can efficiently and reliably serve customers. The training may also be motivational so your personnel can convey an essence of quality service. The bank may monitor personnel to not only indicate problem service areas but also reward service excellence. Below is a list of statements regarding various managerial inputs. Next to each statement please indicate your agreement with the statement as it applies to your bank and its management by circling the appropriate number from "1" for strongly disagree to "7" for strongly agree.

Scale Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Our management believes in training personnel so they have the skills to provide quality customer service.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes in nurturing service leadership.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes in empowering personnel to best serve our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes in rewarding excellent customer service.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes in developing an environment for teamwork.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes in measuring performance of our service personnel.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes in competing for the best available talent.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes our personnel should exceed customer expectations in service.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes in standing behind the service our personnel provide customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our management believes it is important for personnel to emphasize trust when dealing with customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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