

Empirical Researches of Relationship Marketing: the Role in Foreign Countries and Lithuania

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This article emphasizes the importance of empirical researches of relationship marketing, their theoretical and methodological validity, and summarizes the experience of foreign and Lithuanian researchers in this field. It also shows the evolution of the definition of relationship marketing. There is a great number of empirical researches, which require developing a generalized approach to their theoretical validity, the adequacy of applied methods, and possibility of their practical use. This study is carried out in order to evaluate the importance of researches made by Western countries' scientists in the last two decades, to systematize different approaches to customer loyalty problems, and review the newest works of Lithuanian researchers dedicated to various aspects of relationship marketing. It can be deduced that the concept of relationship marketing has evolved under the influence of separate scientific researches. Different purposes and aspects of these studies were the reason of various relationship marketing concepts. In practise it determines the fact that relationship marketing means different things to different companies. Relationship marketing is a form of marketing, in which emphasis is placed on building longer term relationships with customers rather than on individual transactions. It involves understanding the customers' needs as they go through their life cycles. It emphasizes providing a range of products or services to existing customers as they need them. Relationship marketing can be analysed on both - micro and macro levels. Macro level is concentrated on the analysis of the role that relationship marketing plays to customers, personnel, providers, reference groups, intermediates (agents, brokers, etc.), and domestic markets. On micro level relationship marketing is considered a transition of marketing orientation – from single transactions with different customers to establishment and development of relations with the most important customers. Relationship marketing looks at customers and clients over a longer term. At the core of relationship marketing is the notion of customer retention – it takes into account the lifetime value of a customer. An improvement in customer retention can cause an increase in profitability. Relationship marketing involves the creation of new and mutual value between a supplier and individual customer. Novelty and mutuality deepen, extend and prolong relationships, creating yet more opportunities for customer and supplier to benefit one another. Nonetheless, it

can be deduced that researches dedicated to relationship marketing are still in their primary stage in Lithuania. They are carried out in the context of other research objects. These researches concentrate on various aspects of relationship marketing and they lack systematic approach. A major part of such theories are not tested by neither quantitative nor qualitative research methods. It is characteristic of most Lithuanian concepts of relationship marketing. Meanwhile, euro-integration results in increased competition and new possibilities that force Lithuanian companies to improve their marketing activities. One of ways to achieve that involves the evaluation and adaptation of one of the most advanced marketing forms – relationship marketing.

Keywords: *relationship marketing, customer loyalty, empirical researches of relationship marketing.*

Introduction

Problem statement. The majority of companies in Western Europe and the United States apply this marketing form, which is based on building and maintaining relations with clients and partners. The methods of relationship marketing vary from those of classical marketing. Foreign scientific magazines and journals have published many theoretical and empirical works concerning various aspects of relationship marketing. Unfortunately, researches dedicated to relationship marketing are still in their primary stage in Lithuania.

Overall aim. The aim of this study is to evaluate the importance of empirical studies of relationship marketing, to assess their theoretical and methodical validity, in the experience of foreign and Lithuanian researchers in this field.

Purpose of the study:

1. To investigate the evolution of relationship marketing concept.
2. To review and assess the importance of researches made by Western countries' scientists in the last two decades.
3. To systematize various approaches to customer loyalty problems.
4. To analyze and evaluate the newest works of Lithuanian researchers dedicated to various aspects of relationship marketing.

Object of the study: Empirical researches of relationship marketing, published in the last two decades in foreign countries and Lithuania.

Methods: Comparative analysis of scientific literature, analysis and systematization of published empirical studies of relationship marketing.

The Concept of Relationship Marketing

The term “relationship marketing” has been commonly used in scientific literature as a synonym of another term - “interaction approach” (Gronroos, 1994). Lithuanian scientists often use the term “relation-based marketing”.

Although there is no firm agreement among researchers, the term “relationship marketing” is increasingly applied not only in scientific literature, but also in business practise.

Palmer (1996) has suggested an interesting interpretation of relationship marketing that contains three levels:

- **Tactical level.** Relationship marketing is treated as one of sales promotion instruments (creating various loyalty programs with help of modern information technologies).
- **Strategical level.** Relationship marketing is described as a process, in which a company seeks to bind customers with legal, economic, technological, geographical and time ties. It concentrates on maintaining relations with existing customers rather than looking for new ones.
- **Philosophical level.** Relationship marketing is defined as the essence of marketing, which redirects marketing strategy from product life cycle to customer life cycle. In this case, the emphasis is put on coordination of all functions, which include customer-based orientation, integration of all activities, involvement of personnel, and serving the needs of target markets.

It can be deduced that the concept of relationship marketing has evolved under the influence of separate scientific researches. Different purposes and aspects of these studies were the reason of various relationship marketing concepts. In practise it determines the fact that relationship marketing means different things to different companies (Morris, 1998).

Relationship marketing can be analysed on both - micro and macro levels. Macro level is concentrated on the analysis of the role that relationship marketing plays to customers, personnel, providers, reference groups, intermediates (agents, brokers, etc.), and domestic markets. On micro level relationship marketing is considered a transition of marketing orientation – from single transactions with different customers to establishment and development of relations with the most important customers.

Depending on the context of researches, relationship marketing concept may have a different content. Relationship marketing is:

- Attracting potential clients, developing and maintaining relations with them (Berry, 1983). It is one of the first definitions of relationship marketing. Although it does not show the content of relation-

ship marketing, it serves in revealing the essence of this phenomenon – the importance of creating and maintaining relations with customers. In long-term prospect it becomes more important than attracting new customers.

- Creating, maintaining and sustaining relations with clients and partners, at the same time realizing the aims of all members of the process (Gronroos, 1994). It is one of the most universal and most often quoted definitions of relationship marketing.
- Relations, networks, and interaction. Relations are contacts between two or more people, but they can also exist between people and objects, symbols or organizations. Networks are sets of relations, while interaction is described as activity that happens in networks and relations (Gummesson, 1996).
- A detailed form of database marketing – an industry based on technologies, which is used in order to attract and maintain customers (Peppers, Rogers, 1997).
- All marketing actions directed to creation of relationship-based trade, as well as development and maintenance of it (Morgan, Hunt, 1994). This definition is formulated in order to cover all the possible forms of relations between a company and other market members. But it rather emphasizes the final aim of relationship marketing than reveals the content of its concept.
- A concept that unifies quality of marketing and customer service (Christopher, Payne, Ballantyne, 1991). This approach is aimed at covering several dimensions of relationship marketing: 1) concentration on customer retention; 2) concentration on advantages of products; 3) long-term orientation; 4) high-quality customer service; 5) exceptional attention that a company shows to customers; 6) growing importance of cooperation with customers; 7) growing importance of quality in achievement of company’s goals.

It can be concluded that most of relationship marketing definitions concentrate on results rather than input (Blois, 1996). Some researchers have tried to formulate a universal definition of relationship marketing, and herewith create a universal relationship marketing theory (Gummesson, 1996), but since relationship marketing is so complex and specific, the creation of such theory is impossible.

Different interpretations of relationship marketing reflect various research objects, and emphasize different aspects of business phenomena. In spite of that, these concepts and definitions do not collide, but complement one another, and reveal the essence of relationship marketing as a new marketing concept. It is concentrated on creation and maintaining long-term and mutually beneficial relations among various market members.

The Review of Foreign Researchers’ Works

There have been carried out many empirical researches concerning the development of marketing rela-

tions in business in Western countries during the last two decades. The majority of them were oriented towards customer-seller (supplier) relations, inner relations in a company and their influence on business success. The authors of this article will concentrate on researches that, in their opinion, have contributed most to a deeper understanding of relationship marketing.

Many-sidedness of relationship marketing has resulted in the fact that relationship marketing is the object of many researches.

Sellness and Sallis (2003) investigated customer-seller (supplier) relations through the perspective of **learning**. They stated that customer-seller (supplier) relations can be formed, and it is necessary to learn how to improve them. Learning should not be single-sided – results can be achieved only with the help of mutual efforts and cooperation. The authors formulated three hypotheses:

1. Learning about relations has a positive effect on development of relations;
2. Mutual trust positively affects cooperation;
3. The level of existing cooperation, complexity of processes, instability of environment, and specificity of actions have an impact on learning about relations, while latter positively affects relations.

Sellness and Sallis investigated 315 dyads (customer-seller (supplier)) and came to this interesting and unsuspected conclusion: **mutual trust negatively affects learning about relations**. This can be explained by weakening motivation to develop relations, because they

naturally become closer as mutual trust evolves.

Verhoef (2003) investigated the effectiveness of customer relations management strategies. The author compared the effectiveness of relationship marketing tools to attract and retain customers in different periods of time.

The research involved clients of a Danish financial service company. It contained two stages. 1677 respondents took part in the first survey, and the results were compared with the company's database (for instance, Verhoef tried to find a correlation between customer satisfaction and repeated buying). 918 clients took part in the second survey. The data collected in that way was reliable, because it:

1. Assessed the opinion of customers (the subjective factor).
2. Verified the opinion and compared it with facts (the objective factor).

The study showed that marketing programs based on economical use positively affect both – customer attraction and retention. Meanwhile direct address and personalized offers have influence only on gaining new clients.

Although maintenance of customer relations and its influence on customer behaviour was the object of many empirical researches, the exceptional importance is attached to relationship marketing tools that are designed to increase customer loyalty. Verhoef names several factors that affect customer loyalty.

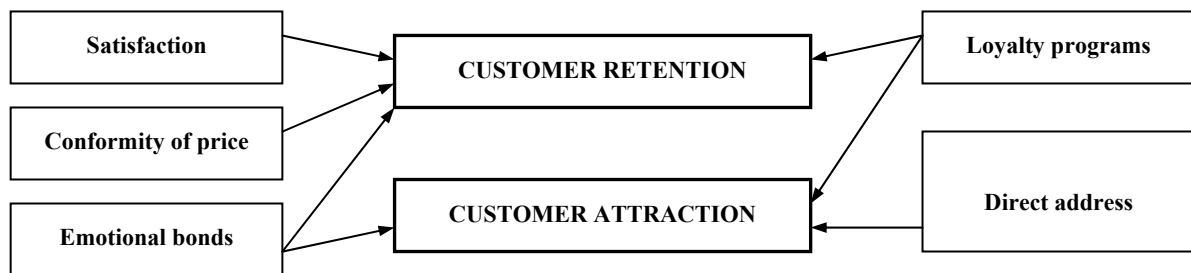


Figure 1. The factors that affect customer loyalty

Source: Verhoef, P.2003. *Understanding the Effect of Customer Relationship Management Efforts on Customer Retention and Customer Share Development*. *Journal of Marketing*, Oct, Vol. 67 Issue 4, p30.

It can be noticed that these are only the main factors that affect customer loyalty. In order to assess the influence of relationship marketing on customer loyalty, researches have carried out many empirical researches during the last 15 years. The main results are showed in Table.

Lemon, White and Winter (2002) analysed the influence of loyalty programs on intention to buy in entertainment industry. Their research proved the effectiveness of loyalty programs and importance of relationship marketing.

Bolton, Kannan and Bramlet (2000) in their long-term studies assessed loyalty programs in credit card business. The main conclusion of their research is that loyalty programs have a positive influence on customer

retention and frequency of use of service.

Dietz, Pugh and Wiley (2004) carried out a research that is important for business relations marketing. They proved that:

1. The more important is the object of service to a customer, the stronger is the correlation between a customer's attitude and service climate.
2. The more frequent are the contacts between personnel and clients, the stronger is the correlation between a customer's attitude and service climate.

It can be concluded that observed correlation determines the strategy of service industry companies. It is obvious, that in this type of business it is important to apply at least the basic methods of relationship marketing.

Researches concerning the influence of relationship marketing on customer loyalty

Measurement of loyalty	Examples of researches	Research type	Research field	The main idea	Additional results
SURVEYS					
Intention to buy	Anderson and Sullivan (1993)	Experiment	Industry	Satisfaction (+)	
	Morgan and Hunt (1994)	Interdisciplinary	TV channels	Use (+) and obligations (+)	
	Zeithmal, Berry and Parasuraman (1996)	Interdisciplinary	Industry	Service quality (+)	
Intention to buy	Garbarino and Johnson (1999)	Interdisciplinary	Theatre visitors	Satisfaction (+) and obligations (-)	The effect depends on the orientation of customer relations
	Mittal, Kumar and Tsiros (1999)	Long-term	Car market	Satisfaction (+)	
The share of customers	Mackintosh and Lockshi (1997)	Interdisciplinary	Retail sales	Obligations (-)	
	De Wulf and Iacobucci (2001)	Interdisciplinary	Retail sales	Quality of relations (+)	
	Bowman and Narayandas (2001)	Interdisciplinary	Grocery brands	Satisfaction (+)	Square effect of satisfaction
OBSERVATIONS					
Customer retention and long-term relations	Gruen, Summers and Actio (2000)	Interdisciplinary	Professional associations	Obligations (0)	
	Bolton (1998)	Long-term	Telecommunications	Satisfaction (+)	Satisfaction effect is influenced by age
	Mittal and Kamakura (2001)	Long-term	Car market	Satisfaction (+)	Satisfaction effect is influenced by customer peculiarities
	Lemon, White and Winer (2002)	Long-term	Entertainment industry	Satisfaction (0)	Satisfaction effect is influenced by expectations
Use of service	Bolton and Lemon (1999)	Long-term	Telecommunications and entertainment industry	Satisfaction (+)	Satisfaction effect is positively influenced by fair price
	Bolton, Kannan and Bramlett (2000)	Long-term	Credit cards	Satisfaction (+) and fair price (+)	Differences in service (in comparison with other companies) play an important role
Mixed purchases	Verhoef (2003)	Long-term	Financial service	Satisfaction (+) and fair price (0)	Satisfaction and fair price effects vary depending on age

Source: The authors, according to the listed above research works

Wong (1995) enriched the field of empirical studies of relationship marketing by introducing analysis of supply chain, which unifies several market subjects for a common goal. Wong used the model by Deutch, and assumed that maintenance of relations, their quality and the final aim directly depend on how members of supply chain perceive their common goal. A common goal may induce three possible perceptions of a situation: cooperation, competition, and striving to independence. Therefore actions of supply chain members may be different:

- In spite of declaring common values, supply chain members may try to achieve their own business objectives.
- Interests of supply chain members, that understand the use of a common goal, may coincide.
- There may be a situation, where some supply

chain members only seemingly take part in agreement, at the same time trying to dissociate from common activities or decision making.

Wong (1995) makes these conclusions:

1. Common goals are necessary for cooperation relations, because they inspire constructive cooperation.
2. Common goals may worsen relations in supply chain. It is a rather unsuspected conclusion. Wong states that it is characteristic of "swim or drown" situations, when a producer must take radical actions to stay in market. Usually these actions are also forced on other supply chain members.
3. Common goals induce long-term relations, trust, and commitment, especially when common goals have a long-term or strategic character.

4. Effective cooperation relations stimulate the quality of common results. On the contrary, ineffective cooperation leads to poor quality and worse relations.

Companies that are open to innovation win most from partnership relations. Other authors, such as Frazier (1983), Anderson and Narus (1990, 1991) also created widely applied relation development models.

Ruyter and Semeijn (2002) carried out researches in order to estimate the influence of close relations on international partnership network and its quality. They concluded that relationship marketing was very important in

international business.

Ruyter and Semeijn made assessments of: a) relations that come from the same activity; b) relations that are determined by resources; c) personal relations of business members. Their aim was to find the correlation between relations of business members and performance results of their partnership network (expressed by their intention to invest). If interaction is positive, a separate member is inclined to participate in this partnership, which means – to invest his time, financial and other resources.

The scheme of relations analysed above is given in Figure 2.

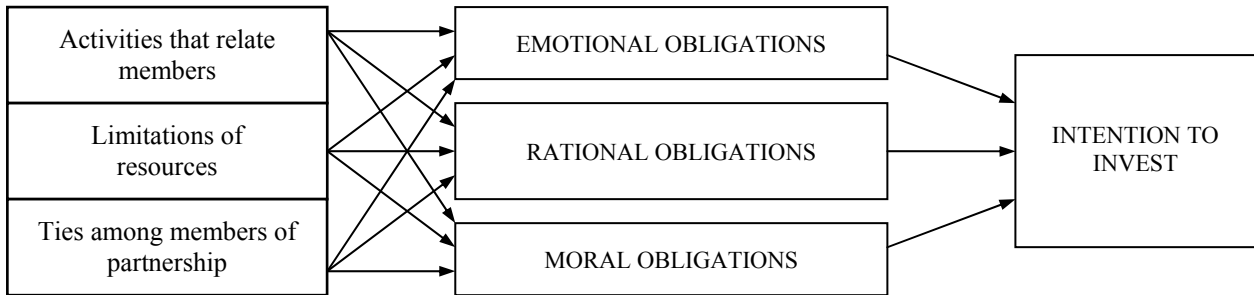


Figure 2. The scheme of partnership relations

Source: Ruyter, K., Semeijn, J. 2002. Forging buyer-seller relationships for total quality management in international business: the case of the European cement industry. *Total Quality Management, VOL. 13, NO. 3.*

The authors made those conclusions:

- In order to retain a client, more importance should be attached to maintenance of relations concerned with production.
- It is not enough to communicate with a client – more attention should be paid to development of relations with partners (especially) suppliers.
- Limitations of resources affect only rational obligations, and do not have any importance to emotional or moral obligations. The more partnership members

get involved in rational obligations, the less they are interested in emotional or moral obligations.

- In spheres where resources are important personal relations tend to be weaker and less influential.
- Personal relations have significant influence on all the three types of obligations.

Ruyter and Semeijn’s research is oriented towards industry sector and distribution (not service sector and promotion), and it is one of the first attempts to reveal the content of partnerships in international business chain.

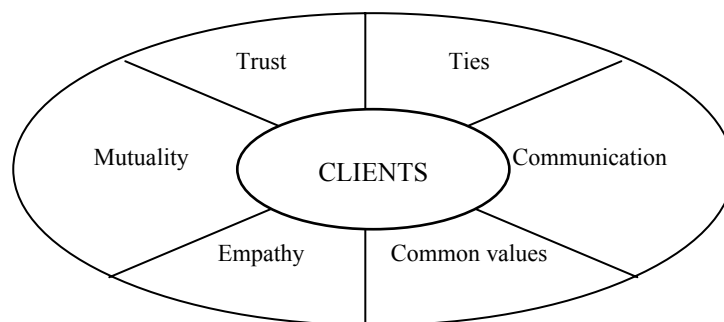


Figure 3. Purposefulness of relations with clients

Source: Sina, L., Tsea, A., Yaub, O. 2002. et. al.. Relationship marketing orientation: scale development and cross-cultural validation. *Journal of Business Research 5863*

Sina, Tsea and Yaub (2002) contributed to empirical studies or relationship marketing by investigating purposefulness of relations with clients. They analysed 500 companies in order to measure the spread of relationship marketing in the Eastern Asian markets (China, Hong

Kong). It is the first definite evaluation of relationship market in psychographic context.

The researchers propose that relationship marketing has six elements: trust, ties, communication, common values, empathy and mutuality.

- Trust is a category which describes to what extent one party of partnership believes that another party will fulfil its obligations.
- Ties are defined as a relationship of two parties, which is made in order to achieve one or several common goals.
- Communication is described as formal and informal sharing of information between a client (buyer) and seller.
- Common values show that members of relationship have similar understanding of common social and moral matters.
- Empathy is a situation where partners understand each other's situation and are capable of evaluating it from another partner's position.
- Mutuality is to be understood as mutual discounts and concessions granted for goods and services that will be provided in the future.

The research is important not only in cognitive, but also in methodological sense. The use of psychographic criteria enables to determine the direction of a company's relationship marketing activities and aims. Together with

cultural and economical criteria, it can be used to measure the spread of relationship marketing in Lithuanian business service market.

Wong and Sohal (2002) investigated the relation between trust, obligations and quality of relations in retail sales. The research was carried out in two levels: 1) salesperson level; 2) shop level. Wong and Sohal found out that there was a strong positive correlation between trust in a salesperson and trust in a shop itself. But neither form of trust had any direct linkage to quality of relations.

It can be deduced that this research stimulates the development of empirical studies in many fields of marketing, but we should notice that respondents of the study were retail sales clients. In order to apply these methods and results to service industry companies, we should pay attention to differences of these businesses.

Van Auken (2001) also contributed to relationship marketing studies, although he did not carry out any empirical researches. The author analysed problems of resource allocation in a car industry. Val Auken tried to create a universal model of relationship marketing in a company.

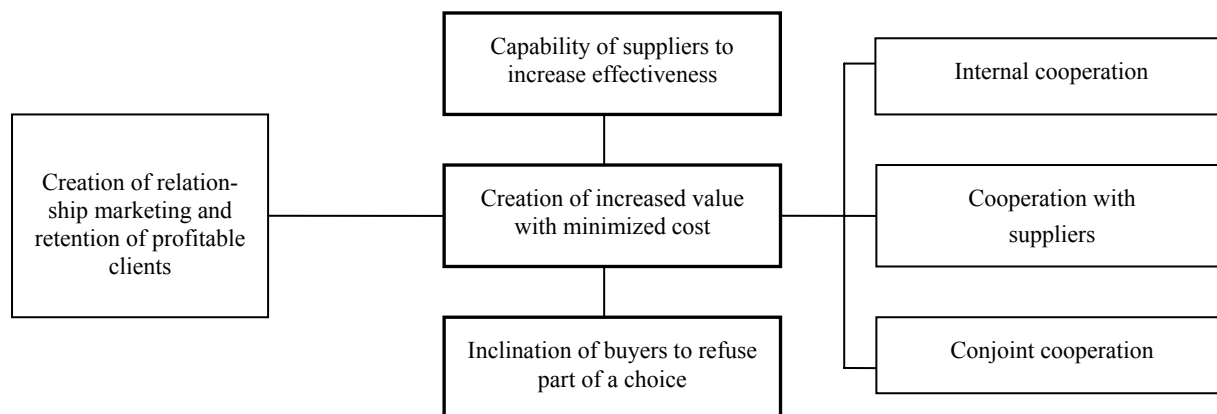


Figure 4. A modified relationship marketing model by Van Auken

Source: Sheth, J. 1996. *The Evolution of Global Marketing and the Relationship Imperative*. Paper presented at the American Marketing Association Strategic Marketing Faculty Consortium, Scottsdale, AZ.

Works on Relationship Marketing in Lithuania

Researches dedicated to relationship marketing are still in their primary stage in Lithuania. They are concerned with different aspects of relationship marketing, but lack in systematic approach. Most of these analyses were carried out in the context of other research objects.

Several aspects of relationship marketing were investigated by Baptista and Šliburytė (2003). The authors investigated customer complains that were received by the Internet. Baptista and Šliburytė tried to evaluate the importance of reacting to complaints in order to improve relations with customers. The emphasis was put on a feedback.

This study shows that problems concerning relationship marketing become increasingly interesting among Lithuanian researchers. Baptista and Šliburytė give rec-

ommendations for received complains database management. The methods, applied in the study, such as analysis and generalization of scientific literature, comparative and systematic analysis, are insufficient, however. The field of this study is very specific – it concerns improvement of relations with the use of Internet. The scientific value of the study could be increased by additional quantitative empirical researches of customers.

The object of the study lacks in specifying – we do not know what type of market was investigated. The research would be more useful and definite if customer complaint analysis would be limited by geographical criterion (country or regional level).

Aleliūnaitė and Urbanskienė (2000) discussed separate aspects of relationship marketing by investigating goods and brands and their relation with customers in marketing culture. They analyzed the influence of brand identification, because customer behaviour as a result of

feedback is the most important factor affecting sales and financial stability of a company. The main emphasis was put on customer-company relationship, which is determined by brand identification.

Studies concerned with relations that appear as a result of brand awareness are scarce not only in Lithuanian, but also in foreign scientific literature. The research by Aleliūnaitė and Urbanskienė concentrated on products (goods) rather than services, because brand identification in service industry is far more complicated. They also dissociated from other elements of marketing mix.

The authors based their study on concepts that had resulted from empirical researches. They concentrated on trade relations that can be described as a field of action for relationship marketing. Companies are induced to participate in trade relations because they get profits, and customers take part in trade relations because they are motivated by expected value that a product has. Aleliūnaitė and Urbanskienė propose that customer behaviour is motivated and purposeful, so it should not be underestimated as only a reaction to promotional actions. Any trade is characterized by social and psychological elements, not only by simply exchange of values. It can be deduced that relationship marketing is capable of creating added value and long-term profits. Thus Aleliūnaitė and Urbanskienė confirm the statement that was earlier made by Gummesson (1999) – relationship marketing contributes to added value.

Although the study by Aleliūnaitė and Urbanskienė enables to make new hypothesis in the field of relationship marketing, it is not based on direct empirical researches. The analysed concepts were confirmed by other scientists in their empirical works. The time and place factors should be taken into account as they determine other conditions (economical, political, social, etc.). The conclusions made by Aleliūnaitė and Urbanskienė would be more significant and valuable if they were confirmed by empirical studies in a definite environmental and business conditions.

Vaitkienė and Sližienė (2002) state that value creation for customer becomes the main aim of organization. It becomes possible only when organization knows its customers, and learns their needs and expectations. Occasional one-time agreements are insufficient, because they cannot guarantee a long-term business success. Therefore organizations must create and maintain long-term relations with their clients. Although this study is oriented towards quality management, it concerns some aspects of relationship marketing.

The authors emphasize that loyal customers are an important condition of business success, because they affect:

- **The size of profits (income).** Customers are the source of income for any organization. Income may grow because of newly attracted customers. On the other hand, an organization may put efforts in keeping existing customers and creating their new needs, and thus increase its profits.
- **Market price.** An organization may gain and keep its position in a market by continuously communicating and maintaining relations with its

customers. In this way, it can prove its superiority with regard to competitors.

- **Competitive advantage.** An organization that is capable of creating a product or service which, from customer's perspective, is better than its competitors' products (services), may gain a "monopoly".
- **Ability to create a dialogue between a company and customer,** which contributes to learning about company's strengths, weaknesses, possibilities, threats, and competitive advantage.

Vaitkienė and Sližienė (2002) propose that systematic collection of data about customer may contribute in measuring the value of customer life cycle. Many organizations fail in believing that attracting new customers is all that matters. The emphasis should be put on developing and maintaining relations with existing customers. The authors agree with Gummesson (1999), who stated that relationship marketing value is defined by long-term financial income. The main conclusion of the authors is that relationship marketing should become one of the main tools to improve quality management nowadays. Like in most Lithuanian studies, the theories presented by these authors, were not tested empirically.

Conclusions

- The concept of relationship marketing has evolved under the influence of separate scientific researches. Different purposes and aspects of these studies were the reason of various relationship marketing concepts, term definitions and content interpretations.
- Relationship marketing can be analyzed on several levels, and can be based on various theoretical models. Empirical researches concentrate on customer-seller (supplier) relations that are the foundation of both – relationship and classical marketing.
- Most empirical researches analyze the importance of maintenance of relations with customers and the influence of this process on customer behavior. Nevertheless, an exceptional place among these studies belongs to investigations of correlation between relationship marketing tools and customer loyalty.
- Analysed researches dedicated to relationship marketing in Lithuania are carried out in the context of other research objects. These researches concentrate on narrow aspects of relationship marketing and they lack in systematic approach.

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Santykių marketingo empiriniai tyrimai: jų vaidmuo užsienio šalyse ir Lietuvoje

Santrauka

Daugelyje JAV ir Vakarų Europos įmonių plačiai taikomas santykių marketingas, kurio esmė – santykių su klientais ir partneriais palaikymas bei vystymas. Jo metodai žymiai skiriasi nuo klasikinio marketingo. Užsienio mokslinėje periodikoje šia tema publikuota gana daug teorinių darbų ir empirinių tyrimų, apimančių įvairius santykių marketingo aspektus. Lietuvoje, deja, empiriniai santykių marketingo tyrimai tebėra pradinės stadijos.

Empirinių santykių tyrimų gausa reikalauja apibendrinto požiūrio į teorinį jų pagrįstumą, naudojamų metodų adekvatumą ir platesnio praktinio pritaikymo galimumą. Eurointegracija dėl padidėjusios konkurencijos bei atsiveriančių papildomų galimybių verčia Lietuvos įmones tobulinti savo marketingo veiklą. Vienas iš būdų tai padaryti – patikrinti bei įvertinti vienos iš pažangiausių marketingo formų – santykių marketingo adaptavimo galimybes ir praktinį jo pritaikumą Lietuvoje.

Tikslas

Darbo tikslas – įvertinti santykių marketingo empirinių tyrimų reikšmingumą, nustatyti jų teorinį ir metodologinį pagrįstumą, apibendrinti užsienio ir Lietuvos šios srities tyrėjų patirtį.

Terminas „santykių marketingas“ literatūroje dažnai vartotas kaip termino „sąveikos požiūris“ sinonimas. Lietuvos mokslininkų darbuose santykių marketingas neretai vadinamas dar ir „ryšių marketingu“. Nors tarp tyrinėtojų nėra sutarimo, terminas „santykių marketingas“ tampa vis plačiau vartojamas ne tik mokslinėje literatūroje, bet ir verslo praktikoje.

Priklausomai nuo atliekamų tyrimų konteksto, santykių marketingo sampratai suteikiamas skirtingas turinys. Santykių marketingas - tai:

- klientų pritraukimas, palaikymas ir ryšių stiprinimas (Berry 1983);
- būdas užmegzti, palaikyti ir stiprinti ryšius su klientais ir partneriais, o kartu gauti pelno ir įgyvendinti visų susijusių proceso dalyvių tikslus (Gronroos, 1994). Tai vienas iš universalesnių ir dažniausiai cituojamų santykių marketingo apibrėžimų;
- ryšiai, tinklai ir sąveika. Ryšiai - tai kontaktai tarp dviejų ar daugiau žmonių, bet jų esama ir tarp žmonių bei objektų, simbolių ir organizacijų. Tinklai - tai ryšių rinkiniai, o sąveika apima veiklą, vykstančią ryšių ir tinklų viduje (Gummesson, 1996);
- detali duomenų bazių marketingo forma, t.y. technologijomis pagrįsta priemonė, naudojama siekiant pritraukti ir išlaikyti klientus (Perpers, Rogers, 1997);
- visi marketingo veiksmai, nukreipti į sėkmingų santykius pagrįstų mainų kūrimą, vystymą ir palaikymą (Morgan, Hunt, 1994);
- koncepcija, vienijanti marketingo kokybę ir vartotojo aptarnavimą (Christopher, Payne, Ballantyne), 1991.

Kai kurie tyrėjai bandė pateikti visa apimančią santykių marketingo apibrėžimą ir net sukurti bendrą santykių marketingo teoriją (Morgan, Hunt, Gummesson), tačiau *dėl santykių marketingo įgyvendinimo sąlygų specifiskumo nėra ir negali būti vienos bendros santykių marketingo teorijos.*

Skirtingos santykių marketingo traktuotės, suformuluotos skirtingame tyrimų kontekste, atspindi skirtingus tyrinėjimo objektus, išryškina skirtingus naujų verslo reiškinių aspektus. Vis dėlto įvairios turinio sampratos ir pateikti apibrėžimai nesikerta tarpusavyje, tačiau papildo vienas kitą ir atskleidžia santykių marketingo kaip naujos marketingo koncepcijos esmę - ilgalaikių abipusiškai naudingų santykių su rinkos dalyviais sukūrimą, palaikymą ir plėtojimą.

Per pastaruosius du dešimtmečius Vakarų šalyse buvo atlikta nemažai empirinių tyrimų, tiesiogiai susietų su marketingo santykių plėtojimu versle. Didžioji jų dalis apėmė ryšius tarp pardavėjo ir pirkėjo, įmonės darbuotojų ir klientų, įmonės vidinius santykius ir jų įtaką verslo sėkmei. Santykių marketingo daugiasluoksniškumas nulėmė tai, kad jie tapo įvairiapusių mokslinių tyrinėjimų objektu.

F. Selness ir J. Sallis (2003) tyrinėjo vartotojo ir pardavėjo

(tiekejo) santykius per *mokymosi prizmę*. Autoriai teigė, kad vartotojo ir pardavėjo santykius galima formuoti ir net būtina abipusiškai mokytis juos gerinti. Jų manymu, toks mokymasis nėra įmanomas tik vienos iš šalių pastangomis, bet būtina bendradarbiauti. Jų atlikti tyrimai parodė, kad ekonomine nauda pagrįstos santykių marketingo programos teigiamai veikia tiek vartotojų pritraukimą, tiek ir jų išlaikymą. Tuo tarpu tiesioginis kreipimasis su unikaliais bei personalizuotais pasiūlymais iš esmės veikia tik naujų klientų pritraukimą. Šiaip ar taip abu veiksniai turi tik labai ribotą įtaką klientams pritraukti ir išlaikyti.

Nors santykių su vartotojais palaikymą bei šio proceso įtaką vartotojų elgsenai empiriniuose darbuose tyrinėjo nemaža mokslininkų, tyrimams apie santykių marketingo instrumentų taikymą vartotojų lojalumui didinti tenka išskirtinė vieta.

K. Lemon, T. White, R. Winter (2002) analizavo lojalumo programų įtaką ketinimui pirkti pramogų versle. Jų tyrimas įrodė lojalumo programų efektyvumą ir pagrindė santykių marketingo svarbą.

R. Bolton, A. Kannan ir P. Bramlet (2000) ilgalaikio pobūdžio tyrime įvertino lojalumo programas kreditinių kortelių versle. Pagrindinė autorių išvada – lojalumo programos turi teigiamą įtaką vartotojų išlaikymui ir paslaugų naudojimosi dažnumui.

J. Dietz, D. Pugh ir J. Wiley (2004) atliktas tyrimas ypač svarbus verslo paslaugų santykių marketingo srityje. Nagrinėdami su paslaugos teikimu susijusius santykius, autoriai įrodė, kad kuo svarbesnis paslaugos objektas vartotojui, tuo stipresnis ryšys tarp paslaugos atlikimo klimato ir vartotojo požiūrio. Kuo dažnesni kontaktai tarp paslaugą teikiančios įmonės darbuotojų ir klientų, tuo

stipresnis ryšys tarp paslaugos atlikimo klimato ir vartotojo požiūrio.

Galima teigti, kad nustatyta koreliacija determinuoja verslo paslaugų įmonių marketingo strategiją. Akivaizdu, kad tokiame versle tiesiog būtina taikyti bent jau bazinius santykių marketingo metodus.

Santykių rinkodaros empirinius tyrimus praturtino A. Wong (1995), aprėpdamas ne tik santykius, užsimezgančius tarp pirkėjo ir vartotojo, bet ir visą tiekimo grandinę, kuri bendram tikslui vienija keletą ūkio subjektų. Labiausiai iš partnerystės santykių palaikymo laimi tos kompanijos, kurios nėra užsisklendusios, yra atviros naujovėms.

Plačiai taikomus santykių vystymo modelius sukūrė G. Frazier (1983), J. Anderson, J. Narus (1990, 1991). Jais pasiremdami, K. Ruyter ir J. Semeijn atliko tyrimus, siekdami įvertinti glaudžių santykių įtaką tarptautinio partnerių tinklo kokybei, žymėdami, kad santykių marketingas itin aktualus tarptautiniame versle. Vertinant K. Ruyter ir J. Semeijn darbo reikšmingumą, svarbu tai, kad šis tyrimas apima santykius, susijusius su gamybos sektoriumi ir paskirstymu, o ne paslaugų teikimu ir rėmimu, ir yra vienas pirmųjų bandymų atskleisti partnerių ryšių turinį tarptautinėje verslo grandinėje. Lietuvoje santykių marketingo tyrimai kol kas dar tik prasideda. Deja, jie buvo atliekami tik kitų tyrimo objektų kontekste. Suprantama, kad tokie tyrinėjimai paliečia tik atskirus santykių marketingo aspektus, ir jiems trūksta sisteminio požiūrio.

Raktažodžiai: *santykių marketingas, vartotojų lojalumas, empiriniai santykių marketingo tyrimai.*

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