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***WORKING PAPER SERIES ON
RESEARCH IN RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT***

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Bas Hillebrand and Josée Bloemer

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Address	Nijmegen School of Management University of Nijmegen Thomas van Aquinostraat 1 P.O. Box 9108 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands Phone: +31 (0)24 361 14 07 Fax: +31 (0)24 361 20 28

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Bas Hillebrand
Josée Bloemer

Nijmegen School of Management, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Correspondence to:

Bas Hillebrand
University of Nijmegen, Nijmegen School of Management
P.O.Box 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Tel: +31(0)24 3611407
Fax: +31(0)24 3612028
Email: b.hillebrand@nsm.kun.nl

Why consumers resist relationships with service providers

Abstract

A major assumption in relationship marketing is that consumers are willing to engage in relationships with suppliers. Recently the academic literature has become aware of the fact that not each and every consumer is always interested in a relationship. Yet, it is still unknown why consumers resist relationships. This exploratory study tries to answer this question by means of 24 in-depth interviews with consumers. Results indicate that there are various reasons why consumers do not want to engage in relationships. Theoretical and managerial implications and directions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: consumer behavior, resistance, relationships, exploratory research, services

Introduction

Building relationships with consumers has widely been accepted as one of the most important (if not the most important) tasks of marketing. The marketing literature matches this with an enormous amount of research on several aspects of relationship marketing. Remarkably, there seems to be some kind of axiom in the relationship marketing literature that consumers are willing to engage in a relationship with a supplier. Some authors mention that relationship marketing may not be appropriate because it takes two to tango and sometimes the consumer is just not interested in relationships (e.g. Anderson 2002, Day 2000, Fournier et al. 1998, Grönroos 1997). However, remarks in this direction are rare and the reasons for it have hardly been investigated (see Gwinner et al. 1998, Bendapudi and Berry 1997). Yet, it is very likely that a substantial part of the consumer population does not want a relationship with (certain) organizations (Dowling 2002, Price and Arnould 1999).

We believe that it is important to understand why. This paper aims to uncover the reasons for this reluctant behavior, i.e. Why do consumers resist relationships with organizations? The basic idea behind the research is that engaging in a relationship is not necessarily the opposite of not engaging in a relationship and that the factors influencing the former may be different from the factors influencing the latter (Bloemer and Kasper 1995). This is in line with Herzberg (1987) who distinguishes between motivational factors and hygiene factors when studying motivation in the workplace. As Rodin (1982) argues we do not like everyone whom we do not dislike because the criteria for liking and disliking are distinct. Even when people appear to meet our liking criteria we sometimes fail to explore matters further because the risks and costs of following up seem too high.

Theoretical background

In order to study non relational behavior we first have to define the concept of relationships. Relationships have been defined in various manners. Some researchers have taken a very broad perspective, including almost all recurring interactions between buyer and seller varying from repeated interactions based on inertia to true loyal behavior (cf Day 2000). Here, we focus on relationships in line with the latter perspective, i.e. relationships characterized by loyalty and commitment (cf. Bloemer and Kasper 1995, Dick and Basu 1994, Jones and Sasser 1995). While relationships are mostly regarded first and foremost as something among family members and friends, people may also engage in commercial relationship with organizations, individual employees such as service providers (Iacobucci and Ostrom 1996) and even with brands (Fournier 1998).

Therefore we define relationships as the biased behavioral response, expressed over time, by some decision making unit, with respect to one or more alternative organizations, suppliers or brands out of a set of alternatives, which is a function of psychological (decision making, evaluative) processes resulting in commitment to the organization, supplier or brand (Bloemer and Kasper 1995).

In a business to business context, Biong et al. (1997) found five different reasons why organizations do not want to engage in a relationship with their supplier: (1) they fear to become dependent, (2) they perceive not enough value in a relationship, (3) the supplier lacks credibility, (4) the organization does not have a relational orientation, and (5) because of rapid technological developments. Likewise, Gassenheimer et al. (1998) found attitudes toward dependence effect channel relationship outcomes, suggesting that dealers who fear dependence may be more inclined to resist relationships with suppliers.

In a consumer setting, Price and Arnould (1999) studied 'commercial friendships' between consumers and hairdressers. They found that a substantial number of their respondents did not want a relationship with their hairdresser. The literature suggests a couple of reasons for this relationship-adverse behavior. For instance, people may not want to engage in a relationship with a particular organization because they do not want to be associated with a certain supplier and brand (Bhattacharya and Elsbach 2002, Fournier and Yao 1997). Also, research has shown that some consumers are inherently more inclined to engage in relationships with suppliers than others (Bloemer et al. 2003, Odekerken-Schröder et al. 2003).

While the literature thus provides some indications why consumers would resist relationships, the topic has not been properly addressed yet. Findings are incomplete, largely anecdotal and focussed on relational instead of non-relational behavior. A more comprehensive overview of the reasons why consumers resist relationships is needed.

Method

In line with many studies on relationship marketing (e.g. Bendapudi and Berry 1997, Odekerken-Schröder et al. 2003, Price and Arnould 1999) we conducted our study in a services context. A service delivery process is highly interactive, requiring inputs from both service provider and consumer, enhancing the likelihood that a relationship will be formed. As this research is highly explorative in nature focusing on uncovering the reasons for consumers not to engage in relationships with service suppliers, in-depth interviews with consumers was selected as the preferred method of data collection (Calder 1994, Strauss and Corbin 1990). We asked 24 consumers to select one or more service suppliers they did not have a relationship with although they were satisfied about the supplier. By focusing on interactions consumers were satisfied about we excluded non-relational behavior simply due to the fact that the supplier did not render satisfactory services. Next, respondents were asked to tell their experience with these service providers. Also, the respondents were asked about the reasons for not wanting to engage in a relationship.

On average the interviews lasted about 50 minutes each. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The focus of the analysis was on identifying consumer reasons for not engaging in relationships. In particular, all transcripts of the interviews were read and examined by both researchers and key phrases were highlighted in order to identify recurring thoughts and feelings consumers had with regard to the suppliers. The phrases were labeled and organized into categories of types of reasons. Differences in interpretation between the two authors were discussed and resolved (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Results

The interviews reveal that there are 6 main reasons for not engaging in relationships with service providers. It should be noted that consumers may have combinations of reasons for non-relational behavior with one specific organization. In the following the reasons are described and illustrated by some quotes from the interviews.

A frequently mentioned reason for not engaging in relationships is *indifference*: in some situations it does not matter to consumers who is going to supply the service as the perceived

differences between the suppliers are small or even non-existent. For instance, one respondent says: “In my opinion, one notary could deliver the service as good as any other. I don’t need a trusting relationship for that. He only administrates. I always feel that notaries give standard advice. So you could just as well select anyone you like.” As a result, consumers just select the supplier which is most convenient. For example, when discussing photoshops, another respondent remarks: “I just select which one is closest by. I want the photos developed as quickly as possible because I’m curious to see the photos. And I don’t care which one does the job.”

Closely related, consumers may not be completely indifferent, but feel it is just *not worth the effort* to build up a relationship. This seems especially the case when suppliers are very infrequently patronaged, as indicated by the following quote: “The time between two occasions I use the services of a notary is so long that I don’t feel the need to build up [a relationship].”

Another reason is *price consciousness*. Some consumers feel that relationships restrict them in their opportunity to shop for the best price. When discussing travel agencies, one of them notes “I just look for the cheapest. By doing all this comparing I found out that prices may vary substantially. One time this travel agency is cheapest and the next time another may be cheapest.”

A *need for freedom* may also stimulate non-relational behavior. Freedom gives consumers a sense of autonomy and a sense of being in control. Several respondents indicate that relationships make them feel less free to make a choice. They feel pushed to patronage that particular shop or supplier. “I want to be free to go wherever I want. I would find it very oppressive [to be in a relationship]. I just don’t want to be stuck.” says one respondent. It not only gives them feelings of loss of control, but it also may be very inconvenient. One respondent remarked that a relationship would make her feel obliged to patronage one supplier even when it would not be handy. Another even said that she would feel guilty if she would go to a competitor while having a relationship with a service provider. In order to avoid these kind of difficult situations consumers sometimes want to remain at a distance. For instance, one respondent revealed that he hated to be addressed too personally in a restaurant. He wanted “some space” between the waiters and himself: “they don’t need to know me”.

Non-relational behavior may also be prompted by a *need for variety*. This may be for various reasons. First, it may be functional in nature in the sense that consumers “do not want to miss any opportunity”, as one respondent puts it, and therefore keep switching from one supplier to another. They believe that one supplier may not fulfil all their needs. For instance, one respondent frequents various sports instructors because “other sports instructors have different perspectives and can give other tips and advice. This makes me feel that when you go to various [sports instructors] you get a more complete idea of what is best for your body. I’m willing to do an extra effort for that.” Second, a more hedonic reason for seeking variety is a need for excitement. Consider the case of visiting a restaurant. Several respondents indicated that they do not like to stick to one restaurant because “it would get boring”, as one of them called it. Instead they like to move around. “I want to try things out when it comes to eating. I like that. You see another interior, different attendants, you get different things on the menu, you meet other people.” Not only restaurants, even shoe repair shops may deliver variety according to one respondent as for her it is a good way to meet people she normally would not meet because they frequent different shops. Third, variety may also be needed to impress others. Visiting a wide range of suppliers gives consumers the opportunity to show their knowledge on that particular service category to others. Says one respondent: “If people say ‘I’ve been there and there’, I can say ‘oh, I’ve been there as well’. Just to join the conversation.”

Finally, some consumers want to spread their patronage over a wide variety of suppliers because they want *to support them all*. Especially when it comes to smaller shops, they do not want to single one out as they feel it would not be fair and because they feel all of the suppliers deserve their money. “I think that partly thanks to my money these little companies exist longer. That makes me feel better about myself” said one of them. Another, when talking about restaurants, said in a similar vein: “When you see these people [from the restaurant] exert themselves to make things good, to make it pleasant for the visitors, then [I think] they deserve it.”

Conclusion

A major assumption in relationship marketing is that consumers are willing to engage in relationships with service providers. However, it seems that not each and every consumer is always interested in a relationship. With our exploratory in depth interviews, we identified six reasons for consumers not to engage in relationships with service providers: indifference, not worth the effort, price consciousness, need for freedom, need for variety and a want to support them all. These reasons seem to differ from the common antecedents of relationships in literature like relationship proneness, quality, satisfaction, trust, value and commitment (Bloemer and Kasper 1995, Boulding et al. 1993, De Wulf et al. 2001, and Nijssen et al. 2003).

In terms of theoretical implications, our research is a first indication that the reasons for the willingness to engage in a relationship may be different from the reasons for resisting a relationship. This means that there is no continuum between the resistance to engage in a relationship with service providers and the willingness to engage in a relationship with service providers, but rather that these are, in terms of Herzberg (1987), two truly different concepts.

In terms of managerial implications our research shows that consumers do have clear reasons for not willing to engage in a relationship with a service provider. Knowledge of these reasons might be a first step in the thinking of how to manage these reasons. For instance, if consumers have a need for variety and freedom, this need needs to be managed by indeed offering consumers alternatives by which this need can be expressed.

Since our study is of an exploratory nature further research is needed. This research should focus on finding additional reasons for and modelling the antecedents and consequences for the resistance to resist relationships. Moreover, additional research is needed on which theories might help to explain the resistance to resist relationships. Theories that might be thought of are consistency theory (Festinger 1957, Heider 1958) social exchange theory (Thibaut and Kelley 1959), equity theory (Huppertz et al. 1978) and attachment theory (Bartholomew 1990).

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